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YOUNG KLONDIKE

STORIES OF A GOLD SEEKER.

Issued Semi-Monthly—By Subscription \$1.25 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office by Frank Tousey.

No. 2.

NEW YORK, March 30, 1898.

Price 5 Cents.

YOUNG KLONDIKE'S CLAIM, —OR— NINE GOLDEN NUGGETS. BY AUTHOR OF "YOUNG KLONDIKE."



As Jerry Tolman came through the door, rifle in hand, all sprang up. "Ah, ha! Nine golden nuggets, eh?" cried Jerry. "They are mine!" "Get out of here, Jerry Tolman!" said Ned, sternly. Dick leveled his rifle at the claim shark and the Unknown sprang forward with his club.

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❖ Stories of a Gold Seeker. ❖

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CHAPTER I.

THE DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE.

"HELLO, Young Klondike! Do you want to buy a claim?"

It was on the levee at Dawson City, the metropolis of the Yukon country, that this question was put.

Now the levee at Dawson City is all right in summer time, but this happened to be the middle of November, and the thermometer registered fifty-six degrees below zero.

Phew! But wasn't it cold!

The speaker was a tall, ungainly man, with a reddish beard and sharp features.

He was muffled up to the eyes in an old army overcoat; an immense woolen comforter was wrapped round and round his throat and head and face, with a cloth cap pulled down over it, so that only his eyes and the tip of his beard could be seen.

He spoke again, his voice coming out from the folds of the comforter in a muffled way.

"Hello, Young Klondike, do you want to buy a claim?"

It was a boy of some eighteen years that he was addressing, a handsome, stalwart young fellow; but there was not much more to be seen of his face than there was of the man's.

It don't do to expose one's face in Dawson City when the thermometer takes a tumble, unless you want to get a frozen nose.

"Yes, I want to buy a claim," called the boy, from behind his wraps. "That's what I'm here for; I'm going up the Klondike to dig for gold."

"So I heard," roared the man. "I've got a claim to sell."

Now, it was quite necessary to shout if one expected to make himself heard, for the wind was sweeping down the Yukon valley, coming over the big mountain opposite Dawson, straight from the North Pole.

No place to buttonhole a friend and tell long stories.

One's legs were liable to freeze stiff if one stopped walking.

The boy and the man hurried on up the levee as they talked; it was a matter of life and death; they either had to keep moving or freeze.

Dawson City is anything but a pleasant place to live in on such a day as this.

"I'd like to talk with you," shouted the boy. "Can't we get inside somewhere? I'm so cold I can hardly speak!"

"Same here," growled the man. "Say, my name is Jerry Tolman. Yours, they tell me, is Ned Golden. Let's go into the Duchess of Devonshire and have a drink."

Thus saying, Jerry Tolman turned off the levee and hurried up the street, closely followed by the boy.

The wind was now at their back, which made it easier walking.

Night was falling, and yet it was not yet two o'clock in the afternoon.

There are only a few hours of daylight at Dawson in November, while in December there are a few days when the sun rises only to go down again—in the summer time, of course, the situation is exactly the reverse.

The Duchess of Devonshire was no gorgeously appointed saloon, as its name would seem to imply.

Picture in your mind a long frame building, one story high, with a false front gorgeously painted, giving it the appearance of possessing a second story, and you see the Duchess as Young Klondike saw it—as he had seen it many times before.

Jerry Tolman opened the door and they made a quick dive inside, immediately shutting it again.

It is high treason to leave the door open in Dawson.

The man who was to do such a thing without a good excuse would be liable to get himself into serious trouble. At the Duchess he would be very liable to get shot.

The room which they now found themselves in was packed with men with big hats, long-legged boots, red shirts and everything in the shape of outer coverings that one can imagine.

Some wore ulsters, others old army coats, others bearskin coats, or cowskin coats coming down to their heels; others still, coats made of the famous Mission blankets, with holes for the arms and big collars up around the neck.

Naturally all these peculiarities of costume gave the crowd a unique appearance.

But it was all right in Dawson.

There a man is at liberty to wear whatever he pleases.

The long bar was so crowded that it was impossible to get near it; the tables were all occupied, and in the rear room the rattling of dice and faro chips could be heard.

The Duchess of Devonshire was not only a saloon, but also a gambling house, and yet it was a perfectly straight place.

A miner's gold was safer here than anywhere else in Dawson; in fact, the big safe at the Duchess was full of it.

Bags upon bags were piled up inside, each labelled with the owner's name.

The Duchess was something else besides a saloon and a gambling house. It was a bank, and the safest bank in Dawson.

Consequently it was perfectly proper for Jerry Tolman to invite Young Klondike into the Duchess, to talk over the matter of the claim.

"Henry," said the claim owner, addressing one of the bartenders, "I want to talk business with this gentleman; can we have a room?"

"Sure, Jerry," replied the bartender. "There's a fellow asleep in No. 8; all the other rooms are occupied. I'll go and rout him out."

"I wish you would," replied Tolman, "and bring us in a bottle of Canadian whisky, Henry, and a couple of bang-up cigars."

Evidently, Mr. Jerry Tolman was a man of influence at the Duchess, for Henry hurried out from behind the bar and pushed his way through the crowd.

On the left-hand side of the long room was a row of doors, each communicating with a small room in which there was a table and four chairs.

Millions often changed hands in these little rooms.

There was scarcely a table which had not at one time or another been covered with its weight in gold.

Presently Young Klondike saw an inebriated individual come flying out of one of the doors, hustled along by Henry.

What became of him he did not see, for Jerry Tolman immediately led the way to the room which was open at the top and thoroughly warmed by the big wood stove, which occupied a central place in the long saloon.

"There, now we can talk," said Jerry. "Phew, isn't it cold outside! do you know my jaws are fairly frozen. I can't do anything till I get a drink."

The bottle and cigars came in a moment. The boy had maintained a discreet silence.

He knew Mr. Jerry Tolman by reputation, and was well aware that he was one of the sharpest claim agents in Dawson.

"He expects to get the best of me," thought Ned Golden to himself, "but he won't do it—let him try."

Jerry pushed the bottle over to Ned.

"Help yourself, Young Klondike," he said.

"Thank you—no!"

"What! What! Refuse good whisky at a dollar a drink?"

"I'd refuse it if it was a hundred dollars a drink!"

"Well, have a cigar."

"No, thanks. I can talk business without either whisky or tobacco."

"Humph! Well, I can't," and Jerry proved the assertion by getting outside of a huge drink, and lighting his cigar.

"Now then, what kind of a claim do you want, Young Klondike?" he asked.

"A good one—one that has got gold in it."

"Ha! Ha! Yes, just so."

"Why do you call me Young Klondike?"

"That's what I've heard you called up at the Victoria hotel."

"So you've had your eye on me?"

"I have. I know all about you, young man."

"Indeed? What do you know?"

"Well, I know that you came out here a few weeks ago with old Joe Torry's party. I know that you have a partner whose name is Dick Luckey, a boy like yourself."

"That's true."

"And I know that you are both from New York, and that Henry Welton's daughter Edith is with your party, also a fellow who is danged fool enough to wear a plug hat in the dead of winter. He was telling me about you last night, his name is Meyers I believe."

"His name ain't anything of the sort," laughed Ned; "but I know who you mean well enough."

"Of course you do. What is his name, then?"

"Now you are asking me too much. I traveled with him all the way from Seattle, but I never succeeded in finding out."

"So?"

"Yes; we call him the Unknown."

"Curious rooster, anyhow. He told me he was a detective."

"That's true."

"He was in here looking for a man, and he actually tried to arrest a fellow and came near getting a bullet in his head for doing it, for it wasn't the man at all." Ned laughed heartily.

"Oh, that's an old trick of my friend's," he said; "but now to business. What claim have you to sell?"

"I've got three on the Klondike and four on El Dorado creek at the present time."

"I'm going to the Klondike."

"You're wise. Your chance is best there. My Claims are 189, 172 and 192."

"Got a map?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

Jerry Tolman produced the map and spread it out upon the table.

Before Ned had time to look at it there came a knock on the door.

"Go way! This room is occupied," growled Jerry.

"Is Ned Golden here?" called a voice outside.

"Hello! That's Dick Luckey, my partner!" cried Ned, springing up. "I told him to meet me here at half past two."

He opened the door, admitting a bright looking young fellow.

He was in direct contrast with Ned Golden.

Ned was a tall, well developed boy, but Dick was rather short and slim.

Ned had light hair and large gray eyes; Dick's hair was dark and his eyes were black, but his face was as bright and handsome as Ned's, every bit.

"Mr. Tolman, this is Dick Luckey, my partner," said Ned.

"Happy to meet you, Mr. Luckey," said the claim agent. "Won't you join us in a drink?"

"I'll take what Ned takes," replied Dick, laughing.

"Then that lets me off cheap," said Tolman. "We were just talking claim."

"Shut the door, Dick, and look at this map," said Ned. "Here are the claims Mr. Tolman has to sell."

Dick sat down at the table, and Ned pointed out the claims on the map, which was a very extensive affair, depicting the whole country around Dawson City, and showing where the Klondike river ran into the Yukon.

The claims were all marked off and numbered, and besides the numbers the owners' names were attached.

"Well, what do you say?" asked Jerry, after the boys had studied the map attentively for a few moments.

"Well, the fact is," said Ned, "Dick has already bought a claim."

"So?"

"Yes."

"On the Klondike?"

"Yes."

"What number?"

"One hundred and seventy-one."

"Bought it of Matt Carlin?"

"Yes."

"He told me that he had sold it to a fellow from New York, but he didn't tell me his name."

"It's mine," said Dick.

"Who bought 170?" asked Jerry.

"Miss Edith Welton is the owner of that piece of property," replied Ned.

"Indeed! That's the girl who belongs to your party?"

"The young lady who belongs to our party, yes."

"Beg pardon. I'm rough, but I'm all right."

"I hope your price on Claim 172 is all right, for that's the claim I want."

"I see; you three want to keep together?"

"Naturally."

"Well, then, you struck the right man when you struck me. I'll take five thousands dollars for that claim."

"Not from me," said Ned, drawing back.

"And why not?"

"Because it is too much money."

"Not for that part of the Klondike."

"Excuse me! That part of the Klondike is wholly undeveloped. There ain't a worked claim within a mile of it."

"Say, young man, you seem to be pretty well posted."

"I'm up to snuff, you bet. I'll give you the same price Dick Luckey paid, and that's twenty-five hundred dollars. Take it or leave it, for I won't pay a cent more."

"Nonsense! I couldn't think of selling for any such money."

"Very well. Come on, Dick, there's no use in wasting time here."

"Make it three thousand five hundred dollars, and it's a go."

"No, no, there's no use talking. We're not in it."

"Three thousand dollars?"

"No, sir! two thousand five hundred."

"Oh, well! two thousand five hundred it is, we won't split hairs. Do you take?"

"Yes."

"Settled. And the money?"

"You can have that any time by calling at the Victoria hotel."

"Very well. I'll have the papers made out and be up this evening."

"Of course you will bring the claim recorder's certificate?"

"That ain't necessary."

"But how am I to know that you are actually the owner of claim No. 172?"

"Isn't my word enough? I'm well known in Dawson."

"That cuts no ice with me. I want the certificate."

"I won't give it."

"Then we can't trade."

"But we have already traded."

"No, we haven't. Come on, Dick."

"Stop! You don't leave this room till you've signed an agreement to take 172!"

"Nonsense! We are going now."

"No, you ain't!" roared Jerry Tolman. "I own Claim 172, and you are going to buy it!"

Jerry Tolman was fighting mad, now.

He drew a revolver and put his back against the door.

"Drop it! Drop it!" cried a voice above them.

"You don't own Claim 172, and those boys are going out that door!"

To the surprise of all three, a man's head was projected above the partition.

Perched on the back of that head was a rusty plug hat, and in the hand of its owner was a cocked revolver, which was aimed at Jerry Tolman's head.

"The Unknown!" gasped Ned.

"Open that door!" said the man, sternly. "You blasted claim shark! Open that door!"

CHAPTER II.

KLONDIKE CLAIM NO. 172.

JERRY TOLMAN was a bully, a bluffer and a beat.

He had expected an easy mark in Ned Golden, better known as Young Klondike. The nickname had been given to the boy on the journey from Seattle, and it had stuck to him ever since.

But Ned was wide awake—up and dressed every time.

He sprang upon Jerry Tolman and tried to seize the revolver.

Too late!

The bully fired.

The shot whizzed past the head of the Unknown.

"Ye gods and little fishes! Take that!" cried the man, firing back, and at the same time throwing his legs over the partition and jumping down into the room.

The shot missed its mark, as it was perhaps intended to do, but it had its effect just the same.

Jerry bounced through the door blazing with rage, and fired again.

"I've been robbed! I've been robbed!" he shouted.

By this time everybody in the Duchess was up in arms.

There was a grand rush for the little room.

The bartender pulled a string which connected with the three big hanging lamps.

They were extinguished in an instant.

The crowded saloon was now in total darkness.

Shots were flying, men were shouting.

In the midst of the confusion Ned Golden was pulled violently to the floor.

"Down! Down, Ned! Down, Dick!" whispered the voice of the Unknown. "Keep hold of my coat tails! Follow me!"

Everybody else seemed to be on the floor, too, about that time, and there was a general scamper on all fours for the door.

Such scenes were of common occurrence in the Duchess.

All that was needed was one shot to start the ball rolling.

The noise and confusion was terrible.

Everybody seemed to have turned against everybody else.

Keeping close to the Unknown, Ned and Dick found themselves in the street in less time than it takes to tell it.

Men came pouring out after them.

In a moment the Duchess was emptied.

"Run for your lives, boys!" cried the Unknown. "If Jerry Tolman gets his gang after us we are lost!"

Lights are few in Dawson streets, and by dodging in and out among the buildings, which stand "six ways for Sunday," as the Unknown expressed it, and without much regard for street lines, Young Klondike and his friends were soon able to give the crowd the slip.

Then they made their way back to the Victoria Hotel, and glad enough they were to get in there out of the stinging cold.

"There," said the detective, as soon as they were safe inside, "that's bad break No. 1 for you, Young Klondike! Don't you do anything like that again!"

Ned felt rather ashamed of himself.

The Unknown had warned him of this very man.

"Told you not to have any dealings with that fellow," said the detective. "I've been on to him ever since I began to look around Dawson. He's one of the biggest claim sharks in town."

"Yes, but he has a hold on Claim No. 172," said Ned, "and we want that and must have it. Do you suppose I'm going to separate from Dick, and now that Edith has decided to go up to the mines with us, I feel all the more anxious that we should all keep together."

"We must," said Dick.

"We are going to," replied the Unknown. "Bye-bye, Young Klondike. If a man with a wart on the left side of his nose comes here, you hold him, for he'll be my man."

"You ain't going out again, Zed?" demanded Ned.

"Yes, I am. It's cold enough to freeze the ears off a brass monkey, but I've got to go. I've got business to attend to."

Thus saying the Unknown jammed his rusty plug hat tighter on the back of his head, and hurried out to face the cutting wind.

"It's a wonder his ears don't freeze with that ridiculous hat," said Dick. "He's a strange mortal! By gracious, Ned, he scared me; I was writing up in the room when he bounced."

"Say, Dick," he hollered, "Young Klondike is a fool."

"Of course, you resented that proposition, Dick?"

"Naturally; but for the moment I was almost inclined to admit it when he told me that after all the warnings you have had against Jerry Tolman, you had actually gone alone into the Duchess with him to bargain for Claim 172."

"It was a risk—I own it; but how did the Unknown get on to it?"

"How does he get on to everything the way he does? Don't ask me; we hurried down there and you know the rest."

"Then you knew he was in the next room all the time?"

"Certainly. I tried to give you the wink, but you wouldn't tumble. Zed declares that Jerry Tolman don't own 172 at all."

"I'm told he does."

"I go by Zed."

"Let's go up and tell Edith about it. She may get word of the scrimmage from somebody else and be worried about us."

Dick agreed to this, and the boys went up-stairs to the ladies' parlor.

Edith was not there, so Ned sent the housekeeper up to her room to ask her to come down.

While they are waiting, a few words of explanation may as well be given, for it is just as well to have such dry details over and done with at the start.

Ned Golden and Dick Luckey were two New York boys, who had come out to the Klondike country on the same errand that hundreds of others have gone there, and on which thousands will go and are going now.

They were out for the dust—they were going to dig gold!

On the passage from Seattle, the steamer which carried the party fell in with a wrecked steamer, from which Ned, by a great display of bravery, rescued Edith Welton, who was on the way to Dawson City to look for her father, who had gone to Alaska from San Francisco some time before.

The Unknown, as the boys usually called the detective, was one of their fellow passengers. His real name no one knew, for he had a different one every day, but the boys called him Zed at times, as he had requested them to do so, declaring that Zedekiah was actually his middle name.

From the very start good fortune seemed to attend our young gold seekers.

Dick Luckey, true to his name, found an old pocket-book containing five thousand dollars on the wrecked steamer, which nobody claiming, became his property.

While on the journey from Juneau, Ned had a similar stroke of fortune.

Chance brought him to a deserted hut, where lay the skeleton of a man, and here he found a bag of gold dust worth many thousand dollars.

It was his by right, for near the skeleton was a paper stating that whoever found the dust should keep it.

Thus, instead of landing in Dawson City with only a few hundred dollars in their possession, as they had fully expected to do, the boys reached the metropolis of the Yukon comparatively rich.

Now, to mention a peculiarity of the Unknown and we are done.

His claim was that he had been traveling all over the world, seeking a certain criminal—"his man," he called him.

Who this man was, or what he had done, was as much a mystery as the Unknown himself, but that singular individual had a habit of suddenly pouncing upon strangers and attempting to arrest them, declaring that he had at last found his man, but only to admit his mistake a moment later.

This peculiarity of the Unknown had led our party into some odd situations, and was likely to do so again.

But we have consumed more time in these preliminaries than we intended, and as Edith has already joined Ned and Dick in the parlor, we may as well go right on with our story.

"You must really be more careful, Ned," Edith was saying, for Ned and Dick had told their story. "What would have become of me if you and Dick had been killed?"

"Oh, you will make friends anywhere, Edith, but I don't intend to get killed, so you needn't worry on that score."

"But I do worry. You must be more careful. Let Claim 172 go, and work with us for awhile. When spring opens you can look up another claim."

"No, no! That ain't my style at all, Edith. I'm going to work right now, and I'll have a claim before I leave Dawson. I'm satisfied now that Jerry Tolman don't own 172, but who does? The claim recorder's books show that it originally belonged to a man named Grosser. He never worked it, and this gives any one a right to jump the claim, as they call it out here, and Jerry Tolman pretends to have done this, consequently I was willing to pay twenty-five hundred dollars to buy him off, but, in order to have that amount to anything, I had to have the recorder's certificate, and in order to get that, Jerry had to show that he had done the assessment work on 172. That's what I was trying to get at when the trouble began."

"I don't understand it at all," said Edith. "What is this jumping business, Ned?"

"Why, it's just like this," replied Ned. "I locate a claim, but I never work it—perhaps I never even see it. In order to make my title good, the Canadian government requires that I should work so many days in the year on that actual piece of ground."

"Well, that's all plain."

"Suppose I don't do that assessment work, as it is called, and along comes Dick and begins working on that claim. He files a notice with the recorder that he has jumped the claim, and if I don't show up within a certain time, and comply with certain legal formalities, the claim then becomes Dick's."

"I see; and Jerry Tolman has done this on 172?"

"He claims to have done it on that and a dozen other claims; that's his business, but the claim recorder would not give me any definite statement. Said he would deal with Jerry, and I'd have to do the same."

"Suppose you bought the claim of Jerry—then you'd be a jumper?"

"Yes; I should have to either settle with Grosser, if he ever turns up, or comply with certain legal formalities to wipe him out. I proposed to do the latter, if I could get rid of Jerry."

"I'm afraid you'll never get rid of him now. They say Jerry Tolman is a very vindictive man."

"Oh, I ain't a bit afraid of him," laughed Ned. "We've got to learn to deal with such sharks if we are going to make money on the Klondike. Here we are with everything we need, bought and paid for,

and all ready to start for the diggings. You've bought your claim and Dick has bought his——"

"Hold on, Ned! You bought mine for me."

"No, no, Edith! How many times must I say that the skeleton's legacy was for all of us? You were fully entitled to your share."

"Well, I've got it all in the ground, anyhow, and I only hope something may come of it, Ned."

"Your chance is just as good as either Dick's or mine. Here you are in Dawson City, and you find that your father has gone to South Africa. Can we go away and leave you here? Certainly not. Under no circumstances can you return to San Francisco before spring, so you may just as well go with us."

"Of course," cried Dick, "and a great deal better. We've been together so far, and we'll stick together to the end."

Edith Welton and her young friends conversed for some time longer.

Repeatedly the girl urged Ned to abandon the attempt to get hold of Claim 172, and be content to work her claim for the winter—something which he and Dick proposed to do in any case, for, of course, Edith could not work the claim for herself.

But Ned had his heart set on 172, and nothing else would suit him.

"It may be superstitious," he said to Dick, "but that number has been running in my head, and I can't get it out."

"I wish I could get out of this hot bar-room just long enough to get my breath," said Dick. "I'm stifled here, and the smell of the whisky makes me sick. Do you know I don't think it can be so cold outside as it was."

"That's what I've been thinking. Suppose we go out and take a turn on the levee?"

"I'm agreeable."

"It's a beautiful night, and the wind has completely died away. I don't see why we shouldn't risk it, unless you are afraid of running into Jerry Tolman."

"Afraid of nothing! Do you suppose that would keep me in?" cried Ned. "Come on."

They went up to their room and put on their heavy wraps and sallied forth.

Before leaving the hotel, Ned consulted the thermometer and found that the temperature had risen to zero.

This was quite moderate, and as the boys were well wrapped up, they soon forgot the cold.

There was no one in sight on the levee when they reached it. People stay indoors at night in Dawson unless business actually calls them out.

The boys began a hurried walk down the levee over the crisp snow.

Before them lay the mighty river, one broad expanse of white, a strange silent thing seen there under the stars, when only a few weeks before they had seen it sweeping past the town with its mighty rush.

"It seems hard to believe that it's a river at all, don't it?" said Dick. "Well, it will be only a few days now and we'll be starting. We've got to put in

all the work we can this winter, Ned, to be ready for the spring."

"Wonder if the Unknown means to go up to the Klondike with us?" remarked Ned. "He hasn't said a word about it yet."

"What I'm wondering is where he is now," said Dick. "We haven't seen him since he went out that time. I can't imagine where he's keeping himself. Getting cold, Ned?"

"Not a bit. I'm warm enough as long as I keep moving."

"Suppose we go further down. I hear there's a steamer frozen in about half a mile down the river. Perhaps we could get aboard of her. 'Twon't take us long."

"Just the very thing I was about to propose," replied Ned. "She lies right off the island. I saw her from a distance yesterday. Hello! what's this coming?"

"Dogs, by gracious!" cried Dick.

The jingle of bells was heard in the distance.

Looking ahead the boys saw three large sleds drawn by ten Esquimau dogs each, come sweeping around the point of land at the end of the levee.

It was a party of miners returning from the Klondike, or perhaps from El Dorado creek.

The teamsters were shouting to their dogs and cracking their whips.

They came flying over the frozen Yukon at great speed.

The shouts were heard in many of the buildings along the levee, and as the boys stood watching the approaching dog teams, they were soon joined by others.

Before the teams came up quite a crowd had gathered.

"Look out for yourself, Young Klondike," said a voice in Ned's ear. "Don't you see your enemy behind you? If you don't, then he sees you."

It was the Unknown.

He had come up behind the boys without being observed.

"What do you mean?" demanded Ned.

But, indeed, for answer the Unknown took him by the arm and drew him off to the edge of the crowd.

"Jerry Tolman! Didn't you see him?" he asked.

"No, I didn't; and I ain't going to run away either every time he comes into view."

"Softly, dear boy, softly! Discretion is the better part of valor. I know a thing or two—by gracious, there's my man!"

The dog sleds had already come up upon the levee and stopped before the door of the Klondike House, near which Ned Golden and his friends now stood.

"See me put the bracelets on him!" cried the Unknown. "Don't you stir till I come back!"

He suddenly made a dive into the midst of the crowd, and if the boys had not known him so well, they might have expected to actually see him handcuff a man and drag him away.

But the Unknown did nothing of the sort.

He simply pushed about among the crowd, listening and watching.

In a few moments most of the new-comers had entered the Klondike House.

Others were busy unloading the sleds. There was a good deal of loud talk and confusion. In the midst of all this the Unknown came back again.

"Not my man after all," he said. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, I begin to think I shall never find him, but I have found something else."

"What do you mean?" asked Ned.

"I've found out where Mr. Grosser is, and you have got to move quick if you want to secure Claim No. 172, for Jerry Tolman has started for the steamer just exactly two minutes ago."

"The steamer! Do you mean the steamer that is frozen in around the point?" asked Ned. "We were just going out there."

"You were!"

"Yes."

"Odd that you should have thought of it."

"But what has that got to do with Claim 172?"

"Simply this: Grosser is the captain of that steamer, and he's on board now. He's Jerry Tolman's most bitter enemy, and Jerry has gone out to the steamer to make him sign over the claim. He has sworn that you shall not have it if he has to kill Grosser to keep it from you. Young Klondike, are you armed?"

"You bet," said Ned. "Dick!"

"Well?"

"We don't stand this?"

"Not much."

"Of course we don't," said the Unknown. "I've already seen Grosser. He'll sell if we can get there first, but it's my opinion that Jerry won't hesitate to put a ball through him if it is necessary to carry his point, for Grosser once dead, the claim belongs to Jerry under the law."

Now, while thus talking the Unknown had been on the move, and the boys kept close beside him.

They hurried out upon the ice and rounded the point.

In the distance they could see the steamer frozen in the ice.

But they saw nothing of Jerry Tolman or any one else.

The lights of Dawson were now out of sight behind the headland.

Ned, Dick and the Unknown went hurrying over the frozen Yukon under the stars.

CHAPTER III.

THE ATTACK ON THE DORA BELL.

"KEEP it up this way and we'll be there in ten minutes' time," said the Unknown, as they ran on over the ice.

"You take my breath away, you do things with such a rush," said Dick. "How in the world did you find out that Grosser was on the steamer?"

"How? Why that's my business," replied the Unknown.

"Oh, I didn't mean to pry into your affairs."

"I don't mean that, and you ought to know it. My business is to find out what other people can't find out. I'm a detective, dear boy."

"It's a lesson to me," said Ned. "While Dick and I were wasting time talking you went to work, and all on my account too. It's really very kind of you. I shan't forget this nor what you did for us in the Duchess, either."

"Don't say a word. I don't like to sail under false colors. I started out to find out what Jerry Tolman's game really was, and to do that I shadowed him into a gambling room back of the Klondike House. There I happened to get a good chance to listen, and I heard him tell about Grosser being on board the Dora Bell."

"This steamer?"

"Yes, she's the Dora Bell. Fur trading boat; she's been gone up at the head waters of the Yukon for a year, only to be nipped in the ice when within half a mile of Dawson. Oh, yes, Jerry gave the whole snap away. Grosser is an old boss of his, and Jerry hates him. Murder was in his heart when he talked about the old fellow and he didn't hesitate to say so. That was the reason why I thought I'd take a run over the ice to the Dora Bell, and I did it and saw my man."

"Your man! At last?" cried Ned.

"Pshaw! you know what I mean. My man Grosser—your man, if you like it better. I've had so many men on the string that I can afford to spare you one."

"Did you tell him about me and what I was after?"

"Of course."

"And what did he say?"

"He'll sell. The old fellow is over seventy, and has been knocking about Alaska and the Mackenzie river country for a lifetime. He don't want to do any mining—wouldn't if he could."

"Then he's just the man for my money," said Ned.

"Who's with him on the Dora Bell?"

"Oh, he's all alone there. His crew are up in Dawson, but bless your soul, he don't care for that—he don't care for anything. He's half dead with heart disease, he says, and I guess he tells the truth, for with every word he speaks, he gasps like a fish."

"And you told him you were going to bring me out there?"

"Yes."

"Strange enough that Dick and I were just on our way out there when you met us."

"Nothing strange about it. Only goes to show how great minds think alike."

"What makes you think Jerry Tolman has started for the steamer? I can't see anything of him or anybody else. It's a clean sweep, too!"

"Oh, I know! Wasn't I listening to him there in the crowd? But it takes my breath away to talk on

the run. Drop it now, Young Klondike! What you want is to buy your claim and light out. We'll take the old man with us to the Victoria and settle the business; it really isn't safe for him to stay there alone on the steamer, with Jerry Tolman breathing blood and fire against him. Oh, don't I wish that scoundrel was really my man! Wouldn't I like the fun of clapping the bracelets on him—oh, no! Not at all!"

Considering that the Unknown found it hard to get his breath on the run, he was wasting a good deal of it, and he was running faster than ever.

Another peculiarity of the detective was that he disliked carrying a rifle, and since his arrival at Dawson he had abandoned the one he carried on the journey, and instead took to a short club which he managed to conceal somewhere about his person.

If he wanted to emphasize a remark the Unknown would pull out this club and twirl it about, and he did it now. Perhaps it was just as well for Jerry Tolman that his head was not within its reach.

They were now nearing the Dora Bell, and a tall man enveloped in furs appeared on the deck.

"Hello, there! Hello!" he shouted. "Is that you back again, friend?"

"You bet!" the Unknown called back. "We're coming aboard."

"Oh, ay! I see you now. My sight's getting poor. Come right up!"

By this time they had come alongside the steamer. The tall man threw them down a line.

The Unknown seized it and went up over the side as nimbly as an old sailor.

Of course Ned and Dick made short work of it.

"This is my friend, Young Klondike," said the Unknown. "Ned Golden, if you want his right name, and this is Dick Luckey. You see I've lost no time."

"That's right," said Captain Grosser, speaking in a painful, gasping way. "Neighbor, did you see anything of that man?"

"Jerry Tolman?"

"Yes. I told you how I feared him. He has sworn to kill me—he will some day."

"You needn't be afraid, captain, while we are with you," said Ned. "We ain't going to leave you here, either. You are going back to the Victoria with us."

"Oh, no! Thank you, very much, young man, but I've got five thousand dollars' worth of furs on the Bell, and I can't leave them. My men are all off up to town on a drunk. Wouldn't one of them stay by the old man?"

"You'll go when I tell you all," said the Unknown.

"Ha! You think he means to bring a gang against me to-night?"

"I'm sure of it. I'm afraid he's already started."

"Then that means a fight! Let Jerry Tolman look to himself. I've got a howitzer forward; if that speaks there'll be a dead claim shark on the Yukon to-night; but come below, gentlemen, and we'll talk

our business over in the cabin. I'm sure I'm very glad to meet a couple of bright boys like you two."

"What's that light over there among the trees on the shore?" cried Ned, suddenly.

It was less than an eighth of a mile to the shore.

The light was bobbing up and down among the trees.

For a moment it remained visible, and then suddenly vanished.

As there was no house nearer than Dawson for miles and miles, the appearance of the light was certainly very strange.

"I saw that about fifteen minutes ago," said Captain Grosser. "I can't imagine what it means."

"Can it be Tolman and his crowd getting ready to come out to the steamer?" suggested Dick.

They were all thinking of the same thing, of course.

"I ought to stay on the watch, I suppose," said Captain Grosser, "but it's hard lines to ask you to talk business up here on deck, boys, on a night like this."

"I'll stay," said the Unknown. "You go down and settle about the claim."

Captain Grosser thanked him, and led the way down into a comfortable little cabin.

"Sit down, boys," he said, dropping wearily into a chair. "I'm an old man and haven't long to live. You won't find me hard to deal with. What claim is it you want? I located six a year or more ago; there was no market for them then, and I couldn't work them, but they tell me there's been big gold taken out on the Klondike since."

"I wouldn't think of deceiving you, captain," said Ned. "There's a big boom on all along the line of the Klondike, and it's going to be bigger. I'm ready to pay what the claim is worth. The one I'm after is No. 172, on the north range."

"Young man, I never saw the claim and know nothing about it, except that your friend on deck tells me that my old enemy, Jerry Tolman, has jumped it. I wouldn't go there if I could. I've lived on the Dora Bell for years, and I want to die on her; but tell me honestly, has any gold been taken out from the adjoining claims?"

"None at all," replied Ned. "The rush has not gone that far up Klondike river yet."

"I believe you, for you have an honest face. What's the claim worth to you?"

"We own Claims 170 and 171, and they cost us two thousand five hundred dollars apiece. I offer you the same."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"It's all it is worth."

"Then I don't want any more; but you know the law, I suppose? I have failed on the assessment work, and the claim has been jumped."

"You mean that Tolman has a lien on it?"

"Yes."

"But he has done no work either."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes. I have it from a man who came down from the Klondike last week."

"Then my title holds good. If you do the assessment work, Tolman can't oust you, but the claim recorder must put you on record until the work is actually done."

"Then if I buy of you my title will not be clear?"

"Not absolutely clear. I do not wish to deceive you."

"I think I understand the law, captain. I'll take my chances."

"You may have to fight for your rights."

"I can do that."

"Why not take another claim, one to which you can get a clear title?"

"For the reasons I have given you. There are three of us. We want to keep together."

"Very well. I am satisfied."

"When can I have the papers?"

"Now. I've had them all drawn up for a year; all that is necessary is for me to sign the transfer."

"And for me to pay the money?"

"I can call at the Victoria for the money in the morning; no doubt some of my men will be back by that time."

"You don't have to, sir. I've got the money with me. I can pay right now."

"So much the better. We can settle the matter at once."

Captain Grosser arose, and opening a desk produced the papers.

"I'd like to have my friend examine these if you have no objection," said Ned.

"Of course not."

"His experience has been greater than mine."

"Naturally; he is an older man and seems to be clever, even if he does wear a plug hat in winter time, which seems rather absurd."

"That's his little idiosyncrasy," laughed Ned, "but he's as sharp as a razor. Dick, be good enough to call the Unknown."

"What's his name?" asked Captain Grosser, as Dick started. "Why do you call him that?"

"There you have me," said Ned. "I don't know."

"Oh, beg pardon, I thought you were acquainted. Isn't he to be one of your party. I understood that each of your friends had bought a claim?"

"He is not the one I referred to. It must seem strange, but I really don't know his name."

"Whose name don't you know?" called out the Unknown, who was just coming down the cabin stairs with Dick. "Ain't seen anything more of the light, captain. I reckon it didn't amount to anything. Probably Tolman has given it up. Young Klondike, what's this you were saying? Whose name is it you don't know?"

"Yours for one," laughed Ned.

"By the Jumping Jeremiah, but you must have a poor memory. Thompson is my name—Thompson with p. You know that well enough."

"Oh, to be sure," said Ned, rather vexed, for he felt that this might look suspicious to Captain Grosser.

Perhaps it did, but the old fur trader did not show it.

Ned explained the situation to the Unknown, who rapidly examined the papers.

"These seem to be all straight," he declared.

"Young Klondike, I see no reason why you shouldn't close on your claim."

"Nor I, then, if Captain Grosser is agreeable," replied Ned.

"It's a go, as far as I'm concerned."

"I'll take it," said Ned, and he counted out the money.

Captain Grosser then signed the transfer.

"Hooray! Young Klondike has got his claim!" cried the Unknown. "May there be a million in it! That's my wish."

"We'll have a drink on that," said the captain.

"I have some fine brandy here."

"Thank you—we don't use the stuff," said Ned.

"Your friend perhaps will join me. Mr. Thompson, what do you say?"

"What do I say? As though I dared to say no. I have a reputation to sustain as a man who never was known to refuse."

"Don't believe him," said Dick. "I never saw him take a drink yet, and I've known him for—"

"For a few weeks!" chuckled the Unknown.

"Bring out your brandy, cap."

Captain Grosser arose in his heavy way and moved over to a locker, breathing very hard.

"My heart is worse than ever to-night," he panted.

"Gentlemen, if anything should happen to me before you go, I ask you to turn over all my effects to the branch bank of British North America at Dawson. Mr. Colgan, the cashier, knows all about my affairs, and—great Heaven! What is this? Has the end come at last?"

Suddenly Captain Grosser clapped his hand to his heart, and staggered forward.

He would have fallen if Dick had not jumped in and caught him.

"Don't lay him down! Keep him in an upright position if you want to save his life!" cried the Unknown. "Quick, Ned, the brandy! We may yet bring him back to life."

But it was already too late.

In vain the Unknown tried to force the brandy down the throat of the unfortunate fur trader.

He was already dead—dead in Dick's arms before they could get him into the chair.

This sad ending to the pleasant interview with the kind old captain was overwhelming.

"What shall we do? Hadn't one of us better run for a doctor?" said Dick. "There must be one in Dawson; perhaps he'd come."

"Doctors can do no good here," said the Unknown.

"This man has passed in his checks."

"Dead!" gasped Ned, for neither he nor Dick had realized the true situation.

"Dead undoubtedly."

"Then we had better take charge of this money and

turn it over to the bank, according to his directions?"

"That's what we must do. Hark! What's that?"

"Someone coming up the side of the steamer!" cried Ned, drawing his revolver.

Dick seized the money which still lay on the table.

All three made a rush for the stairs, leaving poor Captain Grosser dead in his chair.

They were not an instant too soon.

Three men were in the act of climbing over the rail.

"Jerry Tolman!" cried Ned. "Back there! Get off this steamer or you're a dead man."

He should have fired first and shouted afterward.

Jerry did.

"That's for Young Klondike!" he roared, discharging his revolver at Ned.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE DIGGINGS AT LAST.

THE shot from Jerry Tolman's revolver flew harmlessly past Ned Golden's head.

The three men sprang over the rail upon the deck.

Three more instantly followed.

Meanwhile, Ned and Dick began firing, but it was hard aiming in the dark, and the shots did no damage on either side.

"Throw down your guns! Surrender!" yelled Jerry, and he led the rush.

The Unknown had his club out by this time.

He jumped right in regardless of the flying bullets, and brought it down with terrible force on the claim shark's head, tumbling him over upon the deck.

Ned and Dick sprang to his side.

Striking out with his right, Ned took one of Tolman's toughs between the eyes and keeled him over, and Dick did the same for another.

This turned the tide.

The others ran for the rail and sprang over, dropping down upon the ice.

Jerry and the other two scurried away on all fours, and gaining their feet went over the rail on the other side.

Ned and his companions could easily have shot all three then if they had been so disposed, but they let them go.

"We'll have you yet!" roared Jerry, and he began firing up from below.

At the same instant three shots in quick succession were heard, and the shouting of many voices came from over the starboard bow.

"Hooray! Help is coming!" cried the Unknown.

A party of a dozen or more were running over the ice toward the Dora Bell.

"Edith! It's Edith!" cried Ned. "No one else could make such a shot!"

Jerry Tolman had taken his ounce of cold lead in the left shoulder, one of the others got his dose in the right arm, both shots from Edith's rifle.

All took to their heels and made for the bushes on the shore, where the light had been seen.

The largest part of the new arrivals followed them; others with Edith came up on deck, the brave girl

coming up over the side as nimbly as any sailor would have done.

"Edith! Well, well! you are always on hand!" cried Ned, "but how in the world did you know we were here?"

"Why, Ned, when you didn't come back I went out to look for you," replied Edith, in her cool fashion. "I went down to the Klondike House with Mrs. Colvin and found these gentlemen just starting for the steamer, for the rumor had spread around town that a gang of toughs, led by Jerry Tolman, had gone out to her. As soon as I heard that the captain's name was Grosser, I made up my mind that you were there."

Explanations followed.

Several of the party belonged to the steamer, but the leader was a captain on the Northwest police force, that very efficient body employed by the Canadian Government to keep order in and about Dawson City.

Ned told his story and explained the circumstances of Captain Grosser's sad death.

By this time the others had returned, failing to run down Jerry Tolman and his gang.

The police captain then took charge of the Dora Bell, and Ned and his friends returned to Dawson.

It seemed a very sad affair, but as the police captain truly remarked, Captain Grosser's sudden death and the visit of Ned Golden and his friends unquestionably prevented a murder.

"Anyhow, Young Klondike has got his claim," remarked the Unknown, as they separated for the night.

The next day was a busy one.

There was the police office to be visited, and a report of the affair on the Dora Bell to be made.

Then the claim office had to be visited by Ned, who exhibited his transfer to the recorder.

"We can't enter the claim in your name until you have done actual work there, young man," was the unsatisfactory answer which Ned received.

"I don't care; I'm going to stick to 172 and take my chances," declared Ned.

He paid over the purchase money into the bank according to Captain Grosser's directions, and the day following the funeral of the dead fur trader, our little party started for the gold diggings.

The journey was performed on sleds drawn by dogs.

The party consisted of Ned Golden, Dick Luckey, Edith Welton, Mrs. Colvin, a respectable Canadian widow, who had been engaged as cook and companion for Edith, and the Unknown.

Besides these, there was Francois LeBaron and Antoine Duval, French Canadians, who owned the dog teams and drove.

The sleds went flying down the Yukon over the ice, at a speed faster than one would imagine.

Soon they swung into the Klondike river, which joins with the Yukon just below Dawson City.

Now the biggest part of the mining in this region has been done, not on the banks of the Klondike, but

up Bananza creek, where El Dorado, Adams and Victoria creeks join it.

Ned's first thought had been to buy claims in this region, but after careful consideration he decided to go further up the Klondike, and buy between Bananza creek and Bear creek.

Claims Nos. 170, 171 and 172, lay on the north bank of the Klondike, about twenty-five miles out from Dawson.

At this time that region lay practically undeveloped, being too far away from Dawson City as a base of supplies.

It was not very cold that day, fortunately for our travelers; the lowest point which the thermometer touched being only twenty above zero.

"When do we reach our claims?" asked Edith, once they were well under way.

"About four o'clock, I believe," replied Ned.

"It will be dark, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"We've got to camp in the snow, of course."

"We certainly have. There's nothing there but woods, according to Francois, but give me forty-eight hours and I'll soon have some sort of a shelter ready. I hope you can stand it, Edith. You know that you are here against my wishes."

"And mine," said Dick. "It's no use saying anything now, Edith, but you really ought not to have come."

"Now, now! Don't you try to discourage me," said Edith, "there's been enough of that done already. When I found that my father had left this country I thought it all over and made up my mind just what to do, and I'm going to do it, and nobody shall turn me from my purpose. Mrs. Colvin spent last winter in the woods, cooking for a mining camp. If she stood it at her age, surely I can."

"I believe you will," said Ned, "but it will just kill me to see you suffer."

They talked further on the subject.

Probably the Unknown would have expressed the same opinion as the boys if he had been there, but he was in the other sled with Mrs. Colvin.

There was a third sled loaded down with the belongings of the gold seekers, by another *habitant*, as these French Canadians are called, named Bernard Du Chon.

The sun rose and it grew a little warmer, but it only ascended a little above the horizon, and then dropped back again.

There was a halt for dinner, at a little after two, and before they had started again, the sun was gone and the stars were out once more.

Occasionally they would pass the hut of some solitary miner, or a collection of huts where a company had located.

All around them mountains rose in the distance; the scene grew wilder and wilder, until at last at a little after four o'clock they saw Antoine turn his dogs into the mouth of a small creek. The Unknown took the reins and the team was stopped, the *habi-*

tant hurrying up the bank over the snow, which was frozen as solid as a floor.

"This must be the place," said Edith.

"It is, m'sieur," said Francois. "We have just left Claim 169; we are on 170 now."

"How can you tell?" asked Ned.

"It is blazed on the trees by the claim surveyor," replied the *habitant*; "see, Antoine has found it. This is the place!"

"Hooray! Hooray!" shouted the Unknown, springing up on the sled and waving his plug hat. "We've got home!"

Ned and Dick joined in the shout, and all were soon together on the bank of the little creek.

"Well, this is a bully place!" exclaimed the detective, as the boys glanced about at their gloomy surroundings. "It ain't exactly the Garden of Eden, nor could a fellow call it precisely tropical, but by the Jumping Jeremiah, we have the woods back of us, and we are sheltered from the northwest wind."

"There's that much to be thankful for," said Dick, ruefully; "but I'm thinking we'll do well if we don't freeze to death to-night here in the snow."

"Ungrateful wretch!" cried the Unknown; "what wouldst thou have? Suppose the mountain and the woods had been on the other side, and nothing to hinder the wind from sweeping down at us from the big blizzard factory up at the North Pole?"

"That's what!" cried Ned. "Don't you say a word, Dick! We are here at last, and we are here for work. Work! That's what's going to tell now."

"I'm ready, Ned."

"Of course you are."

"Certainly we all are," said Edith, "and you'll find that I can work with the best of you; try me at a pick and shovel. I tell you I'm going to work 170 for all it's worth."

"That's the talk," said the Unknown. "We have the Golden claim and the Luckey claim, but I'll bet on the Welton claim every time."

He seemed just as much interested as though he owned a claim himself, which he neither did nor wanted to.

Why he was with them neither Ned nor Dick could have told, and they had no idea how long he intended to remain.

"Pity you haven't got a claim," said Dick. "I'd like to see you with a pick and shovel."

"Ha! Ha! Would you dear boy? Would you? Well, perhaps you shall be accommodated. Wait and see. But I don't want any claim. I'm no gold digger, and I'm so unlucky that if I was to buy a claim the bottom would surely drop out of it or I'd strike a ledge of rock leading down to China. All I want is to find my man."

"And do you expect to find him here?" inquired Ned. "I doubt if there's any one within ten miles of us."

"As likely to find him here as anywhere else, dear boy, and don't you forget it."

"I'm not likely to forget it—you won't let me. I believe you are right."

"Ha! Evidently you think my man a myth."

"I think we've got to hustle if we mean to have shelter for the night. We want to get to work. Plenty of time for talk between this and spring."

Work was what was wanted, and work they did.

The *habitants* immediately set about making a shelter for the night, and the Unknown lent a hand.

Dick, Ned, Edith and Mrs. Colvin proceeded to unload the sleds and place their belongings.

Under a ledge a little further up the creek, there was a sort of cave formed by two big rocks which had fallen together, and it was between these the goods were stowed.

Meanwhile, the Frenchmen had trimmed off four saplings in such a manner that each one formed an upright forked stake.

Across these stakes a ridge pole was laid, and then small cedar trees were cut down and placed on a slant against the poles.

In this manner two huts were speedily built, one for the men and the other for Edith and Mrs. Colvin, being divided by a partition of cedar trees.

This was far better than Ned had anticipated, but the *habitants* were not through yet.

In each hut a small wood stove was set up, and the pipe run high above the ridge pole.

Dry wood was then gathered, and soon fires were crackling in both stoves.

The doors were secured by cedar trees placed against the opening.

In a few moments the interior of the huts was warm and comfortable.

Meanwhile, the *habitants* were at work on another shelter for the dogs, and in this Ned found they intended to sleep themselves. Indeed, they refused to come into the warm hut, declaring that they were used to this sort of thing, and had rather be by themselves.

By the time everything was complete Mrs. Colvin had supper all prepared, and Edith set the table in her own hut.

Ned insisted that the *habitants* should come in and eat with them, which they did, and after the meal was over retired to the dog hut.

Then the long evening began, and a jolly one it was.

Ned played the banjo and Edith sang, and the Unknown smoked his old briar wood pipe and told the most astonishing stories about his adventures in London, Paris, all over Europe, in Asia, Africa and every other part of the world.

"Don't think I'm drawing the long bow, boys," he would begin, "but when I was in Hong Kong in '82 after my man, I did——" so and so.

Next moment it was Calcutta, the next Cairo. The way he jumped from place to place was tremendous, and he kept everyone in a roar of laughter, too.

By nine o'clock the gentlemen retired next door,

leaving the ladies to themselves, and were soon rolled up in their blankets and lying out on the snow.

"Ned, are you awake?" asked Dick, after all had been quiet for some time, and the Unknown was beginning to snore.

"Yes, Dick."

"It's great, ain't it?"

"Better than slaving one's life out working for somebody else, Dick."

"You bet it is! Say, Ned?"

"Well, Dick?"

"Something tells me that the firm of Golden & Luckey is going to be a winner. Just think of it! We may be sleeping right over a big bed of gold!"

After that the boys went off to sleep, and Ned dreamed that he was digging up nuggets as big as eggs.

As for the cold, he never thought of it until he woke up the next morning, and found that the fire had gone out, and his blanket warmed by the heat of his body had frozen fast to the snow.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST STRIKE.

NED was up in a moment.

He looked at his watch by the light of the lantern, and found that it was six o'clock.

"Time!" he called to Dick, and then as he looked around there was the Unknown coming through the door with a big armful of dry wood.

"Ha! Good-morning, head of the firm!" he cried. "I've been out looking for my man, and as I didn't find him I brought in this wood instead. Never you mind about the fire, I'll build it. Edith is awake, and you'd better go in and build a fire for her."

"I can do it, Ned!" called Edith. "Don't you bother."

"Indeed, I will! It's against the law for ladies to build fires in Weltonville. I'm mayor of this town and must be obeyed."

They could hear Edith laughing behind the cedars. Ned thought there never was such a pleasant sound.

"Who says this is Weltonville?" called the girl. "I was told it was Goldenville."

"Then you were told wrong, for it was christened while you slept," answered Ned. "May I come in?"

"Certainly! You'd better if you want any breakfast, for I've made up my mind to obey the mayor."

Ned hurried out after wood, and a roaring fire was soon going in both stoves.

Mrs. Colvin cooked a splendid breakfast, and as the day was clear and comparatively mild, for the thermometer only stood at zero and soon rose to twenty-three degrees, everyone started right in to work and make the most of precious time.

No one thinks anything of zero weather in the Klondike, but when it comes to be forty and fifty below, nothing can be done.

Fortunately for the firm of Golden & Luckey, two full weeks passed and brought neither storm nor change.

These were busy weeks for the boys, but no attempt was made to dig for gold during that time.

The *habitants* had been engaged for those two weeks; all three professed to be carpenters, and they fully made good their claim.

With the assistance of Ned, Dick and the Unknown, as neat a little hut was built as could be found on the Klondike.

It was not built of logs, either. Ned bought it already cut out in Dawson.

The parts arrived that first day on two sleds, and they soon had it framed, and by the end of the first week it was completed.

It was a two-room hut, one on the ground floor and the other in the loft above, with a ladder connecting.

Edith and Mrs. Colvin took possession of the upper room, while Ned, Dick and the Unknown slept in bunks down-stairs.

It was warm, comfortable and cozy, and the boys had every reason to congratulate themselves.

They realized now what a little money for a start meant on the Klondike.

"It's no use talking," remarked Ned the night they moved into their new home. "If it hadn't been for your wonderful luck on the journey, Dick, we wouldn't have been in it. We'd have just had to go to work for wages, and perhaps never would have got a start."

The second week was devoted to surveying their claims and getting ready to begin.

Of course it was impossible to determine exactly the limits of their land.

It fronted on the river, each claim being a hundred feet in width and extending back toward the mountain for a mile, the claim numbers being cut on trees in front enabled them to locate their lines here, but as to the extension it was different, for they had no means of running their lines through the woods.

On the Klondike gold is found differently from anywhere else.

It occurs in the gravel bed which lies under the top soil, and on the bed rock at a depth ranging from twenty to forty feet.

This deposit of gravel underlies the top soil everywhere in this valley; in some places the gravel is "barren"—that is contains no gold.

Where the gold occurs, it is usually found in bunches, termed "pockets," and comes in the shape of small nuggets—occasionally there are big ones found—and loose, coarse dust.

The way to get at this gold is to dig a shaft, or hole, usually five feet by twelve, or perhaps longer or smaller as the case may be.

A small shaft is called a "prospect." A "working shaft" should be at least twelve feet long—some are no wider than four feet.

Once the gravel, or "pay dirt" is struck, it is hoisted out of the shaft and worked for gold, until the miner comes to bed rock.

Further than this it is useless to go, and once the gravel in the shaft is exhausted, "drifting" begins.

This consists of digging in under the top soil on a line with the claim and through the gravel.

Thus, if one's claim is a hundred feet wide and a mile long, and the shaft is sunk at the beginning in the middle of the cross line, one can drift fifty feet from right to left up to his neighbor's line, but on the line of the length, "long line" the drift may be continued for a mile.

Now this may seem easy work, and in a warm country such a mine would offer few obstacles, providing water did not rush in and fill shafts and drifts, as is very often the case.

On the Klondike there is no water to contend with, but there is something equally as bad.

The ground below the first few feet of top soil is always frozen, and has to be blasted out or thawed and dug out before the pay dirt can be reached.

Thus it makes little difference whether one mines in winter or summer, so far as the difficulty of digging is concerned.

All these things Ned Golden carefully studied up in Dawson City, and the boys had come prepared to meet every obstacle, but there was a good week's work before them before they could get ready to begin.

First, the spot for the first shaft had to be selected.

As a matter of convenience, it was determined to begin on 172, Ned's claim, as it was on that land that the hut stood, and moreover, the creek ran through it, and water was necessary for their work.

The *habitants* now proceeded to build a rude log hut over the spot selected.

This was the shaft house, and was intended to protect the boys from the weather and to keep the snow out of the hole.

Next a rude shed was built on the bank of the creek, the roof projecting over the ice-dam upon which one side was carried.

This was to cover the water hole and help to keep it open.

These and other preparations consumed the entire week.

On the second Sunday night the *habitants* left the camp, and started back to Dawson City with their dog teams.

It was with a feeling of intense loneliness that the little party assembled on the bank of the Klondike to bid them farewell.

"*Bonne fortune! Bonne fortune!*" (Good luck! Good luck!) they cried, as they rode away.

Edith actually shed tears, and, in fact, everyone was moved as they stood there waving to the departing teams, for the Frenchmen had worked faithfully, and now that they were actually gone our little party felt themselves cut off from the world.

"Come! Come! This won't do!" cried the Unknown. "Here we are and here we've got to stay. My man will have to come to me, if I'm to catch him this year. This reminds me of the time when I was stranded on an oasis in the Desert of Sahara. Went up in the woods hunting jack rabbits, and the Mour-

zook caravan went off and left me behind. Ye gods and little fishes! I was stranded in that oasis five years before another caravan came along, and never had a bite to eat except roast jack rabbit all that time."

Next morning mining began in earnest.

Ned and Dick shoveled away the snow and marked out the shaft, while the Unknown stood by smoking his pipe with his hands in his pockets, and never offering to do a turn.

It was the first time he had done anything of this sort, and Ned could not understand it.

Still, he did not like to say anything, for the man was certainly under no obligation to work unless it was to pay for his keep, for he had made no preparation for himself, and he had nothing beyond the clothes he stood in, as far as the boys knew.

As soon as the ground was clear the boys built a big fire, and the thawing of the top soil began.

All they could do now was to stand and watch the fire burn.

"Well, how do you like it as far as you've got, Young Klondike?" asked the Unknown.

"I'm satisfied," replied Ned. "I'm up here for hard work."

"So?"

"Yes."

"I don't like work."

"You don't have to work. Nobody has asked you to."

"Ah! Come now! That's personal. I'm looking for a job; as soon as I find one I am ready to work. I said I didn't like it, but I didn't say I wouldn't work. Want to hire a man?"

"You?"

"Sure; is there any other idle man in Weltonville?"

"Do you want a job?"

"I do; I've been waiting patiently to be hired; what pay do you give?"

"I must ask my partner; I see you think it's time we made a regular bargain."

"High time, unless you want me to eat you out of house and home. Remember the provisions won't last forever; someone has got to do some hunting. I'm first rate at that."

"How about pick and shovel?"

"I am there, too; but the pay?"

Ned was rather puzzled. He had been taking the Unknown for granted. Of course he had not expected him to go away, but on the other hand he had not expected him to put it exactly in this shape.

"What do you want?" asked Dick. "Come out flat-footed, Zed."

"Well, boys, in spite of your good luck on the road to the Klondike—and it was wonderful luck, mind you—I don't suppose you have any great amount of money left."

"That's right," said Ned; "there's mighty little."

"Of course you bought a claim for Edith, and you've started in on your new business in prime shape? Both right; Edith is a good girl, and being thrown

on your hands, it was the right thing for you to provide for her, and it's the sensible thing to start in right on a new undertaking, if you expect things to go on right; but all this took money, and you have only a few hundred dollars left."

"That's right, too," said Ned. "If it wasn't for that——"

"You'd keep me for nothing? What nonsense! All I am driving at is to show you that I understand the situation. I'm here, and I mean to stay here—at least, I want to."

"And we want you, too. Wouldn't have you leave us for the world, Zed. Would we, Dick?"

"Not by any means," said Dick, heartily.

"Which being the case, dear boy—this being thus, so to speak—I say, make a regular bargain with me; I'll charge up time at the rate of four dollars a day against you—they are paying ten on Bananza and El Dorado creeks—and I'll collect when you make your strike, or cross off the score if you don't."

Both Ned and Dick laughed, for the request was ridiculous.

Labor was in great demand on the Klondike that winter. The Unknown could have had ten dollars a day for his services anywhere among the mines.

"We'll do nothing of the sort!" cried Ned. "Dick, a tenth interest in my claim belongs to the great Unknown!"

"Same with mine," said Dick, promptly.

"And four dollars a day for services, payable when we make the strike."

"I agree," said Dick, promptly.

"No, no! I won't have it!" cried the Unknown.

"Ye gods and little fishes, that's too liberal—too rich for my blood, so to speak."

"It's settled," said Ned.

"Decidedly," said Dick. "And I've no doubt, Edith will give a tenth interest in her claim to the Unknown, too."

"Of course I will," said Edith's voice in the doorway. "I've been listening, and I agree to all. How's the work going on, boys?"

"Oh, then, if it's settled I'll just take off my coat and go at it," said the Unknown, cheerfully. "Much obliged, boys. Edith, the work will go on now, for I know where I stand."

And everybody felt better for having made the bargain.

And that was the way Golden and Luckey took a silent partner into the firm without even knowing his name.

There was no better worker on the Klondike than the Unknown, and during the days which followed he accomplished wonders and proved an invaluable ally to Ned and Dick.

It took just three weeks to work down to the gravel.

Again good luck was with the boys. They struck it on the eighteen foot level—something very unusual—and in order to reach it they had to turn down

every foot of trees there was, picking and shoveling after the melting fire had been removed.

"Hooray! Gravel at last!" shouted Dick, who was in the hole filling the bucket with earth, which Ned and the Unknown drew up by means of a windlass.

"Are you sure?" roared Ned, almost falling into the shaft.

"You bet I am! Here it is!"

"Send up a bucket full of nuggets!" shouted the Unknown. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, I must have nuggets! I'm hungry for nuggets! Thirsty for nuggets! Ye gods and little fishes, how slow you are!"

"But I don't see any nuggets!" called Dick, dolefully. "There's nothing here but a lot of dirty black sand!"

"Let's clear out the shaft!" cried Ned, "and then we'll go at it fair. Get down there, Zed, and lend Dick a hand—I'll call Edith to help here."

Edith came willingly.

She often worked at the windlass.

Indeed, she had at first insisted upon working in the shaft, but of course the boys would not listen to anything of the sort.

"Hoist away!" cried Dick, after he and the Unknown had shoveled the bucket full.

Ned began to sing as he wound up the rope, Edith joining in with her sweet voice, for this was always their custom; it seemed to make the work go lighter, and when they were singing they forgot the cold.

"Don't look very promising," said the Unknown, kicking over the sand, which was now exposed in several places. "I can't see a smell of gold; after all it may be only a spur, but it means that we are coming to gravel, just the same."

"What's this?" cried Dick, making a sudden dive.

"Gold, gold!" roared the Unknown. "Ye gods and little fishes, Dick has done it! It is gold!"

And so it was!

Dick Luckey, still true to his name, had made the first strike.

Ned and Edith went wild.

They could scarcely wait to dump the bucket in their eagerness to get down the ladder.

"Gold, Mrs. Colvin! Gold!" screamed Edith. "Dick has made a strike!"

Mrs. Colvin came running out of the house bareheaded, at the risk of freezing her ears, for this was one of the zero days.

By the time she reached the shaft house all hands were in the bottom of the shaft, poking over the gravel, for although the nugget which Dick had found was not much bigger than a marble, it was surely gold.

Suddenly Ned gave a shout, and making a dive into the sand, pulled out an irregular yellow mass about as big as an egg.

"Another nugget!" he cried.

"And here's another!" cried Dick; "mine is bigger than yours."

"What do you say to this?" exclaimed Edith, burrowing down and producing one bigger than all.

"Ye gods and little fishes! Nuggets upon nuggets!" cried the Unknown, "nuggets everywhere, and not a drop to drink! Why can't I find one, too?"

But for some mysterious reason the nuggets seemed to elude the Unknown.

Soon Ned had three, and by a singular coincidence Dick and Edith each found two more.

Nine golden nuggets came up out of the shaft that evening.

Young Klondike's claim was looking up.

But this was only the first strike.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GOLDEN LUCK OF CLAIM 172.

"WHAT are they worth, Ned?"

"Well, they must weigh a quarter of a pound a piece, more or less, Edith."

"About sixty dollars each, then?"

"About that; rather under than over."

"And that's five hundred and forty dollars for the mine?"

"Very near it."

"It's a beginning, Ned."

"Yes, and a good one; it speaks well for the claim that we should have found these nuggets right on the top of the gravel; of course there must be more below."

"Of course."

"And if the pay dirt is so rich on your claim it must necessarily be the same on mine and Dick's."

"It don't follow at all, Edith. It may be rich in my claim, and entirely barren in yours and Dick's."

"Upon my word, you are holding out a pleasant prospect to us," exclaimed Dick. "Give us a few nuggets—won't you, Ned?"

"It's all firm property," laughed Ned. "Of course each own our individual claims—that we decided in Dawson; but all that comes out is to be treated as firm property, and the expenses deducted before dividends are declared."

"I don't understand these business details," said Edith. "Are we to share alike?"

"You would understand if you had read the articles of co-partnership which I drew up, and you and Dick signed."

"Oh, I left that all to you, Ned. I would sign anything you ask me to sign, of course."

"That ain't business. You ought never to sign anything without reading it. I might be the biggest swindler on the Klondike."

"But you ain't, Ned. What nonsense!"

"That's a woman's reason, Edith."

"Come, come, don't say anything against the women, or Mrs. Colvin and I will go on a strike and refuse to cook the supper. I want to know now, how we are going to divide."

"Share and share alike for the first hundred thousand dollars, Edith, and after that each claim pays 25 per cent. of its return into the common treasury, and the balance goes to the owner."

"That's a good scheme," said the Unknown. "It

gives you all a start, and then allows each claim to stand on its own merits—good scheme! Whose idea?"

"Mine," said Ned.

"Great head! And my tenth—how does that come in?"

"It is to be treated as an expense and deducted before we divide, until the first hundred thousand is made; after that you take your chances on each claim with the rest of us. How does that suit, Zed?"

"Most liberal, dear boy. I shan't forget this."

"And we don't forget that you've been a good friend to us," said Ned and Dick in a breath.

"Enough of business!" cried the Unknown. "What's the matter with the banjo to-night? Edith, I'm dying to hear your sweet voice. Sing us something, or it will be necessary to send to Dawson for an undertaker at once."

And Ned got out his banjo and Edith sang.

Another jolly evening followed, and the darkness and cold were forgotten.

Next morning the boys were up at six o'clock as usual, and by seven they were hard at work.

Lanterns were hung in the shaft and shaft house, and the top soil was all cleared away.

This exposed a gravel bed, covering the entire bottom of the shaft.

"There's no doubt that we've struck the true gravel," declared Ned. "We'll get the fire going right away."

Of course, the gravel was now frozen solid, but after the fire burned down the boys were able to dig into it.

They found that they had now passed below the frost line, and it was only the surface gravel which had been frozen.

It came out easily enough, and that which lay below it offered no difficulty at all.

No time was wasted now in looking for nuggets, although the boys saw several of them as Edith and the Unknown hoisted up the stuff.

"Say, we are getting rich up here," shouted the Unknown. "Ye gods and little fishes! Nuggets by the hatful!"

"Let 'em stay where they are; we're going to dig now. Get the water, and after dinner we'll begin washing," answered Ned.

The digging developed no more nuggets.

Indeed it looked to the boys as though the gravel was but worthless stuff, and they were pretty well discouraged when dinner time came.

Meanwhile, Edith and the Unknown had picked about twenty small nuggets out of the gravel which had already gone up—all they could find.

"Don't seem to amount to very much after all," said Dick, dolefully, when they sat down to dinner.

"Wait till we begin washing," said the Unknown.

"That's it," added Ned. "We really can't tell anything about it until we begin working, for the gold dust is so mixed up with the dirt that it don't show

up by lantern light, and after all it's the dust that pays."

"Everything is ready," said the Unknown. "I've got all the water we need in the trough, but it was terrible work. I'd rather be a hod-carrier at work on a twenty-story building, than a water-carrier on the Klondike any day."

Of course, all water had to be drawn through a hole in the ice and carried into the shaft-house.

The second stove was kept red hot here to prevent the water from freezing in the trough, but it did not do it, and when they went out after dinner, the first job was to break the ice in the trough.

Then the washing began.

The gravel was thrown into the rocker, a cradle-shaped box with a small opening at one end.

Water was then thrown over it, and the rocker agitated at an angle which allowed the water to run slowly off, the dirt and fine gravel going with it.

The coarser gravel was then removed by a second application, this time the water being allowed to run more rapidly.

What gold there happened to be in the gravel was supposed to settle in the bottom of the rocker by its greater specific gravity, while the sand and gravel were passing off.

Dick did the shoveling and water pouring while Ned and the Unknown worked the rocker.

Eagerly all eyes were centered on the bottom box.

"It's like churning and watching for the butter to come," said Edith.

"With this big difference," replied Ned; "while you are churning butter you may be working for money, but we are literally making money—actual wealth that was not in existence before, so far as the commerce of the world is concerned."

"What ho! A philosopher!" cried the Unknown. "A political economist! Tell me, good philosopher, seest thou gold in the bottom of this blooming box?"

"Not yet!"

"Then to the winds with your philosophy, but—stop, by the Jumping Jeremiah, I see it, then! Hooray! it's gold! Bright gold!"

It was true!

The water had now grown clearer, and the shining particles gathering in the depression of the rocker could be distinctly seen.

When the rocker was clear, there it lay in a little heap—coarse, yellow flakes and small nuggets the size of peas. There was one nugget almost as big as a pigeon's egg, among the rest.

This was the first pan out on 172.

There were many others before the day closed.

Some yielded nothing, others had just a color, as a trace of gold is called.

Once in a while they struck a good one.

Before they quit for the night, their store of nuggets had visibly increased, and there was a little bag of dust beside.

The nine golden nuggets were held separate from the rest.

Day succeeded day, and luck was varying.

Some days there was quite a find, and on others next to nothing.

At last they struck a streak where there was no gold at all.

But bedrock had not yet been reached, so the boys were not discouraged, for it is on top of the bedrock that they had reason to expect the richest deposit of gold.

All this time the weather had been most favorable.

Cold it certainly was, sometimes very cold, but there had been no fifty degrees below zero days and no great storm, although occasionally there was a little snow.

"This can't last much longer," remarked Ned, one Monday morning, as they were starting in on their work. "It's getting on toward Christmas and we must expect a storm soon."

"How much do you think we've got out already?" asked Dick.

"Why, I weighed up the dust and nuggets last night after you had turned in," replied Ned. "I make it a little over two thousand three hundred dollars."

"No great stakes yet, Ned."

"A good beginning, Dick. We can't expect anything great until we reach the bedrock level, and when that will be nobody knows."

But they both knew within an hour, for by that time their picks struck the rock.

Here was a new excitement.

Dick and Ned immediately began to search the sand for nuggets, and found more than a dozen fair sized ones in a few moments.

Then Edith and the Unknown came down to help, and they had equally good luck.

The afternoon was spent in clearing the shaft and getting the gravel on to the dump.

Next morning they started in washing.

Before they had emptied the rocker twice they knew that their luck had come at last.

The deposit of dust and small nuggets was many times greater than it had been before, and of the larger nuggets they found twenty-four.

By six o'clock—quitting time—they had secured fifty ounces of gold—about a thousand dollars, and fully half the dump remained to be washed.

"This is great," declared the Unknown. "Ned, we want to begin drifting to-morrow."

"Day after," said Ned. "We'll clean up everything fair and square to-morrow, and next day begin on our drift."

"What you say goes. Do you feel satisfied?"

"I ought to. For a prospect hole, I don't think ours can be beat."

"You're right. It beats anything I ever saw. When I was in South Africa in '80, I——"

"Hold on!" cried Ned. "Were you ever really in South Africa? Did you ever work in a gold mine before? Now, tell the truth!"

"Never!"

"Never to both questions, or to the last remark?"

"I really was in South Africa. I've seen many a mine worked and heard lots of mining talk. I know that 172 is all right."

"That's all," laughed Ned, "only while we have you in a serious vein, I'd like to ask——"

"What my name is?"

"Yes."

"Tell it!" cried Dick. "Come now, Zed, it's really time this mystery ceased. Suppose you were to die on our hands?"

"Well, you'd bury me decently, I presume."

"But we should want to notify your friends," put in Edith.

"My dear Edith," said the Unknown, "I have but three friends in the world, and they live in Weltonville, and I trust would be at the funeral. Still I recognize your right to know my name, and I'm going to tell it."

"Hooray!" cried Ned.

"Pitch in! Let's have it!" laughed Dick.

"It is John Doe," said the Unknown gravely. "John Doe or Richard Roe—I've really forgotten which. Ned, get out your banjo and Edith will now favor us with a song."

And so the evening passed as usual, the great mystery of the Unknown remaining unsolved.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DAY OF THE BIG BLIZZARD.

THREE lucky days followed the beginning of work on the drift.

The pay dirt lying above bed rock proved to be very rich.

The first day's clean up was one thousand six hundred dollars.

The second day panned out at two thousand eight hundred dollars.

The third day was the best of all.

The boys struck a pocket of nuggets in the early morning, and by night were able to weigh up over two hundred ounces.

"Young Klondike, your claim is a dandy!" was the verdict of the Unknown. "It has already passed beyond the prospecting stage—it is a mine?"

"What do you suppose I could get for it in Dawson?" asked Ned. "You were about town a good deal and heard all the talk there was going."

"I don't know, but I know that if it was mine I wouldn't sell it for less than a hundred thousand dollars."

"That's enough! I ain't selling though."

Next morning there were stars out when Ned went to get the wood.

It was not very cold, but a piercing wind was blowing, and there was a chill to the air that he had not felt before.

"There's going to be a change," said the Unknown, when he came out of the hut.

"Do you think so?" asked Edith, anxiously.

"I'm sure of it, but we've got to expect it. Here it is away along in December—almost Christmas. We've been wonderfully favored thus far."

"I hope it won't come to-day, then."

"And why?"

"Because just as soon as it's light I'm going hunting; we must have some fresh meat."

"Don't go alone, Edith," said Ned. "We'll knock off work and all go."

"No, no! I won't have it," declared Edith.

"What! After yesterday's luck? I know you are all wild to get at the drift again."

"But——"

"No, Ned, there's no but about it. If I can be spared, I'm going. I shan't go far, only just along the edge of the woods on the river bank, and if you insist upon going with me, why I won't go at all."

There was no turning Edith from her purpose, once she had made up her mind.

Drifting is slow business. During the morning Young Klondike and his partners all worked in the hole.

The gravel was dug out and shoveled back into the shaft, the Unknown banking it up in a convenient place to afterward load it into the tub.

As they worked they saw many nuggets in the mass, but did not disturb them.

Nuggets were getting common now, and created no excitement; these were left to be washed out in the ordinary way, and all three worked steadily on until noon.

"I reckon Edith must have gone out with her gun," remarked the Unknown, as they came up out of the shaft; "she hasn't been near us all the morning, and by the Jumping Jeremiah, a blizzard at last!"

As the Unknown looked out of the shaft-house, he saw that the air was full of whirling flakes.

Ned and Dick hurried up after him.

"It's just begun," said Dick. "See, there's almost no loose snow on the ground yet."

"There'll be enough in a moment," said Ned. "We must get up to the hut and see about Edith at once."

Before they could reach the hut they saw Mrs. Colvin coming toward them with a shawl thrown over her head.

"I'm terribly worried about Miss Edith!" she panted. "She's been gone an hour and I'm afraid this is going to be a hard storm."

"She must be found at once!" cried Ned. "I told her not to go."

"Don't say, I told you so! Act!" cried the Unknown. "It's worse than you think for, dear boy! Get the snow shoes and we'll start right off!"

"Oh, we don't need the snow shoes," said Dick. "Let's hurry right down to the shore."

"Stop! We do need them! I tell you that in half an hour's time we shall be snowed under. Edith must be found at once if we ever expect to see the dear girl again."

There was no talk after that, you may be sure.

All three ran to the hut, and the snow shoes which

had not yet been put to use, were taken down from their nails.

Ned and Dick seized their rifles, and with the snow shoes slung over their shoulders, all hurried over to the bank of the Klondike, which was but a few hundred yards distant from the hut.

There was nothing to be seen of Edith when they reached the shore, nor were there any tracks in the snow, but this they had not expected, for the crust was hard.

Now it was being rapidly covered, and the wind sent the flakes whirling in every direction.

Drifts were rapidly forming; the situation was most serious.

As they pushed on along the top of the bank, Ned experienced that strange sinking feeling which comes to everybody when a loved one is in danger.

And Ned Golden did love Edith, although he firmly suppressed it.

Edith had given him plainly to understand that she regarded him only as a friend.

They hurried on, never speaking, and hardly knowing whether they were making a mistake or not.

Of course, Edith might have crossed the creek and gone in the opposite direction.

This, however, did not seem probable, as she had spoken of keeping along the shore.

"It won't do," said the Unknown, stopping at last. "This storm is going to be a blizzard for fair. We must know where we are at. Ned, let her go!"

"Fire?"

"Yes."

"I was just going to propose it."

"Blaze away, boy! Blaze away! She can't be far from us! Great Heavens, we might easily get turned about in a whirl like this."

Ned threw up his rifle and fired.

The report had scarcely died away when the answer came.

"Heavens! Half a mile off, at least, and on the other shore, if I know anything!" gasped the Unknown.

"She can't have been mad enough to cross the river!" cried Dick.

"That's what she's done, sure," said the Unknown. "Fire again, Ned. We'll listen closely this time."

Ned discharged his rifle a second time and once more the answer came.

There was no doubt about its location.

The shot came either from the frozen Klondike or the opposite bank.

"All we can do is to keep straight ahead and keep on firing," said Ned. "It's a comfort, though, to know that we are on the right track."

They now put on their snow shoes and descended the bank, something which was not accomplished without difficulty, for the snow had already begun to drift heavily.

Again Ned fired.

The answering shot sounded nearer, and they

pushed on as rapidly as possible, and in the very teeth of the storm.

"Give her a call, Ned," said Dick. "I'm as hoarse as a frog, or I'd do it myself."

Ned put his fingers in his mouth and whistled twice. Another shot came in answer.

"We're getting there," said the Unknown. "It's nearer. We are almost across the river now!"

"Edith! Edith! Edith!" he shouted, and the Unknown's voice when he chose to raise it was like a fog horn.

A very little of it went a great way.

They listened.

Words seemed to come on the wind, but they could not be sure.

All at once another shot was heard.

It came from an entirely different direction—down the river.

Then there was another and another.

The last came from across the river, where they had heard the shots before.

"What can it mean?" panted Ned. "Is the wind playing tricks with us now?"

"Surely there can't be any one else lost on the Klondike besides Edith?" cried Dick.

"We'll keep on as we were going," said the Unknown, "though how we are ever to get back without a signal is more than I know. It was madness for all three of us to come away and never say a word to Mrs. Colvin about firing."

"Perhaps those shots were her work," suggested Dick.

But Ned knew that they were not from the direction of the hut.

A little further and they found themselves under the bank on the opposite shore.

It was getting darker—soon it would be entirely dark. The storm had visibly increased.

Ned whistled again, and to his great joy heard Edith calling:

"Here I am! Here I am!" came the cry through the storm.

And with it came a rifle shot.

Like the others, it was from down the river and in the distance.

At the same instant Ned saw Edith coming toward them over the ice.

She was making her way through the drifting snow as fast as she could.

Four brace of rabbits hung over her shoulders, and there were partridges protruding from her game bag.

"Hello, Ned!" she called. "Worried about me? There was no need. I could have got home. Oh, I've had great luck! But who is that firing down the river?"

Ned was breathless, and could scarcely speak.

"There, there now, don't get excited," laughed Edith. "It's hard going, but I should have got there. I went further than I intended, but I've been coming right along."

Another shot rang out.

"No use talking; there's somebody trying to make their way up the river," said Edith. "Here, give me my snow shoes, Dick, and we'll see what it means."

"We've got all we can do to look out for ourselves, I'm telling you that," said the Unknown. "Edith, you and Dick had better make for the house. Ned and I will see what can be done."

"Won't do anything of the sort," said Edith, taking the snow shoes from Dick and bending down to tie them on. "Fire, Ned."

Ned let fly.

Then they heard a shout.

"Help! Help! Help us! We are lost!"

"A man!" cried Edith.

"Two men, anyhow," said the Unknown. "There were two voices there, sure."

"Coming! Coming!" he roared.

They started right along then, pushing down the river against the storm.

It was fearful!

For a few moments it seemed as if they could never do it, and yet they were so well protected that they scarcely felt the cold.

Again the cry came, this time fainter.

When the Unknown answered by shouting:

"Who are you? Who are you?" there was no reply.

A little further, and then another shout.

Still there was no answer.

Ned fired, but no shot came in return.

"What does it mean?" panted Edith. "Can we have been deceived after all?"

"It means that they have gone down, that's what," said the Unknown. "Hello! We're right in it now!"

A wall of snow suddenly rose before them.

They had missed their way and were back under the bank again.

"We'd better get back to the hut," declared the detective. "I tell you this ain't safe. Even if I knew that it was my man who had been doing the hollering down there, I'd say the same."

"Call once more, Ned!" cried Edith. "You try it this time."

But Ned's shout brought no response.

All hands were becoming pretty well used up by this time. It really seemed little short of madness to keep on.

"Just a little further—just a little!" pleaded Edith. "Ned, it would worry me to the last day of my life to think we had left those poor wretches to perish, whoever they may be."

"The chances are they are only a couple of wandering Indians," said Ned, "but still, Edith, it shall be as you say."

"I say go."

"Then we go, but this must be the last attempt."

They pushed on.

Just as they were about to give it up they heard a feeble cry right ahead of them.

Ned shouted in answer.

A few steps further and they saw a dark figure staggering toward them through the snow.

It was a man; he held his hands out and seemed to be moving aimlessly.

"Help! Help! Help! Oh, help!" he moaned.

"He don't see us!" cried the Unknown. "He's off his hooks. Hurry! Hurry! There he goes down!"

It would have been the last of the poor wretch, had not the rescuing party been close at hand.

Ned was first at his side, and seizing the man in his strong arms raised him up.

"Jerry Tolman!" he cried.

It was the claim shark and no one else!

CHAPTER VIII.

WARMING THE SNAKE.

"YOUNG KLONDIKE! Don't kill me! Have mercy on a dying man!"

This was what Jerry Tolman said when he found himself in the midst of Ned Golden and his friends, and began to realize who it was that had come to his rescue.

"You needn't be afraid of me," said Ned. "I wouldn't leave a dog to die in a storm like this."

"Whisky! Whisky! Give me whisky!" gasped the claim shark.

Neither Ned nor Dick had a drop, and they never supposed that the Unknown was differently fixed in this regard.

But he was.

He promptly produced a flask and pressed it to the lips of the perishing man.

Jerry took a big gulp, and the change in his manner and whole appearance was marvelous.

"That's good!" he said. "That puts new life into me. Young Klondike, I shall never forget this. I owe my life to you. I've two partners back here a piece. Help me to save them if there is still time."

Ned thought when he first saw the two men lying face down in the snow, that they were past saving.

But Jerry and the Unknown shook them up roughly.

They begged to be let alone, and it was some moments before they could be induced to drink the whisky.

It revived them once it was down, however, and they were able to stand unassisted.

"Come, come!" cried Ned, "we must start back, or it will be too late."

The two men, who were roughly-dressed fellows of Jerry Tolman's own stamp, at first declared that they could not walk a step, but when they tried it, they found they could.

The wind was now at their back and it was not so bad.

As they pushed on, Dick and Edith leading the way, Jerry Tolman introduced his companions as Bill Struthers and Sam Miles.

"Partners of mine, Young Klondike, and blame good fellows," he explained. "By time, we owe you a big debt. We'd have all been frozen to death, if it hadn't been for you."

"My feet are frozen now," said Struthers.

"So's my ears," said Miles. "Say, where are we going anyhow? If it's far, I'd rather drop down right here and die."

"Brace up!" shouted Jerry. "Don't talk of dying, man, when safety's in sight. Say, Young Klondike, you won't refuse us. I know you've got a hut here."

"Were you coming to my place?" asked Ned, who was a good deal disturbed by the sudden appearance of the claim shark on the scene.

"Well, no! We were heading up above you. I own claims in the two hundreds, and I thought I'd go up and have a look at them, the weather was now keeping so fine, so we started on foot."

"You lie, and you know it!" cried the Unknown, suddenly. "Hold on, Jerry Tolman, don't you raise your gun. If you were to shoot us you are as good as dead, for our hut ain't on the shore and you could never find it in this storm."

Jerry dropped his rifle.

"What do you want to insult me for?" he muttered. "Nobody was talking to you. Me and Young Klondike was getting along all right enough till you put in your oar."

"Stop! Stop right where you are!" said the Unknown, sternly. "I know you to be a thief and a scoundrel; you were heading for our camp, and you meant to make trouble. I've got just one word of advice to give, and if you are wise you'll heed it—be-ware!"

"You won't refuse us shelter. That wouldn't be Christian," whined the claim shark.

"I would," said the Unknown, snapping his teeth, "but Young Klondike won't."

"I can't," said Ned. "I believe every word you say, Zed, but still I can't—are you with me, Dick?"

"I suppose it's got to be," said Dick—his manner showed plainly enough that he wished it hadn't.

"It must be," said Edith. "Ned, you are quite right, and the Unknown is wrong."

"Of course," said the detective. "I knew you'd say so. Yes, it's got to be, Jerry Tolman. We're going to warm the snake, but remember this, I'm an old dog and I've got a watch eye—that eye never sleeps!"

There was a fearful depth of meaning in the emphasis the Unknown put upon these words.

Neither Jerry Tolman nor his partners spoke after that.

They pushed on in silence, and at last reached the hut, where Mrs. Colvin wept for joy as she caught Edith in her arms.

But Edith did not like this.

"Come, come, don't make a fuss over me," she said. "There's nothing the matter and hasn't been. Hurry up with the coffee and help to care for these frozen men."

If their visitors had been their best friends, they could not have met with kinder treatment.

While the storm howled outside the hut, Ned and Dick helped to care for the half-frozen wretches.

They were warmed and fed and made as comfortable as possible.

Night came on.

The snow was now piled up around the hut, so that it was impossible to open the door.

Edith and Mrs. Colvin had retired to their loft.

The Unknown sat smoking in a corner.

Jerry Tolman and his partners were by the fire, smoking, too. There was no talk of going to bed.

"Say, Young Klondike," began the claim shark at last, "I know that we are in the way here and you're all uncomfortable, but we can't help it. Of course we can't leave a night like this."

"Certainly not," replied Ned, who had been writing by the table with Dick. "No one expects you to. I'm not going to turn you out to die."

"Just so. I appreciate that. We all appreciate it, don't we, Bill?"

"That's what we do," growled Struthers. It was the first word he had spoken since he came in.

"You needn't fear us," continued Jerry. "I play square every time, I do. In fact, 'a square deal' is my motto. All we ask is to be allowed to roll ourselves up in our blankets before the fire here and sleep."

"You shall have that privilege," replied Ned. "Is there anything else you want?"

"Yes."

"Better ask for it now. I don't care to talk."

"I want to know about this yere claim of mine; when are yer going to pay for it? I'm only talking business, so keep your shirt on and don't fly out."

"Don't talk to him, Ned," snapped the Unknown.

"Say, old hoss—you with the plug hat—be good enough to keep your 'tater trap shut, will yer?" growled Jerry. "I'm talking to Young Klondike—not to you."

"Let him speak, Zed," said Ned. "It can't do any harm to talk."

"By the Jumping Jeremiah, I'm not so sure of that," cried the Unknown. "If I see a poison snake I stamp my foot on him—so!"

And the Unknown brought his heel down upon the floor with a force that made the hut shake.

The claim shark gave him a black look, but made no reply.

"Yes, Young Klondike," he continued; "I want to talk about my claim."

"Your claim!" sneered the Unknown. "It's Young Klondike's claim."

"Come, now, let him say his say, boss," put in Bill Struthers. "That's only fair."

"Stop, all of you!" said Ned, firmly. "I am supposed to be the head of this firm, and I won't have any row here to-night."

"No one wants to make a row, Young Klondike," whined Jerry, "but even if this yere is British sile, a man has the right of free speech."

"You have it—all the rest of us will keep still and listen. Fire away."

"What I wanted to say was this: I jumped Claim 172 last year, when it was said that Captain Grosser had been killed by the Injuns up in the fur country. My papers was all filed reglar, and everything was straight. When I sold out to you I was the bony fdy owner of this yere claim."

"I deny it," said Ned. "You had never done the assessment work. I doubt very much if you ever set foot on this land before. You jumped the claim to spite Captain Grosser, who was your enemy—let's stick as close as we can to the truth."

"Well, now, I admit that," said Jerry, in his heavy way—"all except the first part. I did do the assessment work, and I have witnesses to prove it. I was here, and I started two prospect holes on this yere claim. I worked double the number of days the law called for, and the claim became mine under the law."

"Where did you do the work? We found no trace of your prospect holes."

"Waal, and did yer expect it? They were filled in again, and are under the snow."

"Absurd! Blame nonsense!" broke in the Unknown.

"Stop!" cried Ned. "I'm running the conversation. Anything more to say, Jerry Tolman—because if you have, you might as well say it now."

"I claim that the work was done."

"Don't go over that again. Admitted for the sake of argument. What then?"

"The claim is mine under the law; the fact that you hold the title from Grosser cuts no ice."

"And you expect me to pay you what?"

"The price agreed upon—two thousand five hundred dollars."

"Suppose I do it! What then?"

"Then I shall ask for my share of any gold you may already have taken out."

"I thought so. What share do you want?"

"Half."

"Don't you want the whole?"

"No; half will do."

"And then?"

"Then I'll go away and leave you alone, Young Klondike. You will have nothing more to fear from me."

"Thank you for nothing. I don't fear you now—never did. Well, have you anything more to say?"

"Nothing more till I get your answer."

"You shall have it when I have consulted my partners. That's business, I believe."

"That's business."

"You and your friends get over in the corner there so we may talk."

Jerry and the others withdrew, and Ned called the Unknown up to the table.

"We may as well settle this right now," he whispered. "Speak low. Dick, what is your view?"

"I say fight. Don't pay a cent," said Dick, emphatically.

"I say the same thing," added the Unknown.

"I'm sorry that I can't agree with you," said Ned. "I want to be fair, and the fact that this man is a thief and a scoundrel don't weigh with me at all, but he has been put to some trouble, and I did agree to take the claim, knowing at the time that I was only buying his interest as a jumper and not the actual title to the land."

"I protest!" cried the Unknown.

"Softly, softly!" whispered Dick. "Hear me out! Rather than have trouble I say let's pay him five hundred dollars, or put it at two pounds of dust. That will end it and avoid trouble; Dick, what do you say?"

"I say no," declared Dick. "I agree with Ned; don't give him a cent!"

"Two against one," replied Ned, quietly. "All right; I give in. Now, then, this settles it. The subject shall never be discussed again."

"That's the way to do business," said the detective. "A firm that works on that principle will never have trouble among partners; Ned Golden, I have respected you from the first, but I respect you more than ever for this."

"Thank you; I only want to do what is right. I ain't so stuck on my own opinion that I can't listen to anybody else. Jerry Tolman, look here!"

"Well?" growled the claim shark.

"We have come to a decision; we won't pay. The claim is mine. I shall stand out for my rights!"

"There'll be trouble if you do. I warn you Young Klondike. Of course I wouldn't raise my hand against a man who has saved my life, but I'll fight you in the courts."

"Very well, fight away, but no more talk. It's getting late, and we must turn in."

That night was the most uncomfortable one Ned ever experienced.

Neither he nor Dick slept a wink, and it is safe to say that the Unknown's watch eye was never closed.

Whether the claim shark and his companion slept or not Ned had no means of knowing; at all events they lay quietly beside the fire except that Jerry got up twice to throw on wood.

But Ned felt that they were being closely watched, and his hand never left the rifle which went into the bunk with him, you may be very sure.

It snowed all night, but cleared off about ten next morning.

The hut was buried up to the roof.

Ned went up into the loft and pushed open the scuttle, and climbed out upon the ridge pole to have a look.

As far as the eye could reach everything was buried under a mountain of snow.

The shaft house and water-shelter had vanished.

The line of the creek had been obliterated.

The mountain was one mass of white, broken by the dark shadows of the spruce and hemlock trees, with here and there a rocky ledge swept clear by the wind.

"All hands must turn to and shovel out," said Ned,

when he came down again. "Jerry Tolman, as you and your friends can't leave us, I shall expect you to work with the rest."

"We'll work," said Jerry, who had been very quiet and civil all the morning. "I don't want to lay back on nobody. I'm a squar man, I am."

"So am I," said Ned, "and I shall pay you for your work, regular wages. I understand the rate is ten dollars a day; that's what you three get while you are here, but remember, I want you to get out of here just as soon as ever you can."

"That's fair and squar. Young Klondike, we agree."

Thus, by his diplomacy and fairness, Ned postponed the day of trouble.

But it was in the air and bound to come.

It took all day to shovel out. Paths were made to the shaft house and creek, and everything put in shape.

"What's to be done to-night, Ned?" asked Edith. "I didn't sleep a wink thinking of those dreadful men."

"I guess none of us did," said Dick. "I know I didn't for one."

"They'll have to sleep in the shaft house," said Ned, decidedly. "We can't stand it."

"They'll rob you all night long," said the Unknown.

"I expect that."

"'Tain't right."

"What would you do? Turn 'em out to die?"

"It can't be," said Edith. "Ned's right. We've got to make the best of circumstances."

"This is warming the snake with a vengeance," growled the Unknown. "We feed him and we work him, and—oh, ye gods and little fishes! Only to think of it! We pay him thirty dollars a day!"

Two full weeks passed and still there was no chance to get rid of Jerry Tolman.

Christmas came meantime.

It was kept as a holiday at Weltonville.

Edith and Mrs. Colvin prepared a splendid dinner.

There was roast partridge and roast rabbit, and bear stakes and all sorts of other good things.

The bear was Edith's game.

It came prowling about the hut one evening, and Edith shot it from the roof, for they were still buried in the snow.

Christmas day the thermometer was fifty-eight degrees below zero.

Of course there was no work done while this temperature lasted, which was three days.

Jerry Tolman and his friends took up their quarters in the shaft house after the first night, but on Christmas they were invited to dinner, and spent the evening in the hut.

Ned played the banjo and Edith sang, and the Unknown told the most tremendous yarns.

As for Jerry, he and his friends behaved very well, and were really quite social.

The boys learned a lot about the country and mines and mining from them that night.

In fact, Ned was learning all the time.

Jerry was an old hand at the bellows.

He worked splendidly and completely altered Ned's methods of handling the gravel in the drift.

Another drift was started, connected with the first by a cross-cut or tunnel.

In this Jerry and his men worked the second week.

And all this time there was never a mention of the claim matter.

Jerry took his orders from Ned and was ever ready to impart information, but never offered his advice unasked.

Things were moving very smoothly, and the output of gold was really astonishing.

Jerry's drift proved to be the richer of the two, and during those two weeks over three hundred ounces of gold in dust and nuggets was washed out.

"Besides what them fellers are stealing," said the Unknown, as they were talking matters over in the hut one night.

"I suppose they are helping themselves," said Ned, "but what can we do?"

What could they do?

It had snowed and snowed; there was no chance for the claim shark to leave them.

It looked very much as if these men would have to stay all winter, and so it proved.

"We've warmed the snake and now we can't get rid of him," growled the Unknown. "Mark my words, he'll turn on us in the end!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE SNAKE SHOWS HIS DEADLY FANGS.

"WAKE up Dick! Time to be stirring."

Ned Golden bent over the bunk and shook Dick by the shoulder.

"All right! I'm a coming!" muttered Dick, and the Unknown, who never needed calling, threw his legs over the side of his bunk.

"All quiet on the Potomac, dear boy?" he asked.

"All quiet," replied Ned. "Same as usual, only it's raining outside."

"Ha! Then the change has come at last!" cried the Unknown. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, it's the eighteenth of March, and about time for the snake to thaw out. Remember what I've told you, Ned! It's only a question of time when he'll show his deadly fangs."

The long winter had passed, and spring was at hand.

Not that there were many signs of it yet. Another month must pass before they could hope for that.

And never during all those weary weeks had the hut been unwatched.

One of the party always stood guard, the night being divided into three watches, and each taking their turn.

But so far the watch had been useless, for the "snake" had made no attempt to show his fangs.

"How much is the firm worth to-day, Ned?" asked Edith, as they sat at breakfast this morning, listening to the rattle of the rain on the roof.

"There's eighty-eight thousand dollars outside of the nine golden nuggets," replied Ned. "Who says Klondike hasn't paid us well?"

It was wonderful luck.

There were few mines in the region which could make any such showing.

But of this our friends at Weltonville knew nothing, for since the arrival of Jerry Tolman and his friends, not a soul had been near the camp.

"It would have been over a hundred thousand if we had all the stealings of those fellers," growled the Unknown. "Why, Jerry was so weighed down with nuggets last night that he could scarcely walk. It was a big day for him, you bet."

"And for us, too," said Ned. "Remember one thing, they have opened up gravel that we would not have been able to touch, and we have got lots out of it. I doubt very much if we would have been where we are now, if they hadn't come. Remember those two weeks in February when our lead ran barren and we never took out an ounce, their drift was averaging a hundred dollars a day to us all that time."

"That's one way of looking at it certainly," said the Unknown.

"And it's the right way," said Ned. "But, come, let's go to work."

"Good-morning, boss," said Jerry, when they entered the shaft house. "By time, the rain has come. I s'pose you will soon want us to be on the move."

"Just as soon as you can go we are ready," said Ned. "Our provisions are running low, and if it hadn't been for the game Edith has been able to shoot we would be going hungry now."

"There'll be a freeze after this, and a crust that we can walk on," said Jerry. "We'll be moving on, then."

The freeze came the following night, and the next morning Ned found Jerry and Struthers in the shaft house alone.

Sam Miles had disappeared.

"Where's Sam?" demanded Ned.

"Gone," said Jerry, gruffly. "He went off in the night; took French leave."

"Huh! And a lot of our dust with him I'll bet," said the Unknown. "'Bout time you was going, too."

"We'll leave to-morrow morning," said Jerry. "I've got the newraligy in my face to-day, and I can't travel against this wind."

"The sooner the better," said Ned, "and now let's get to work."

Jerry muttered something, and went down into the shaft.

"Look out!" whispered the Unknown. "The snake's a-thawing! I don't like this fellow going on ahead! It looks bad, and—by gracious, there's my man!"

"What!" cried Dick.

It was weeks since the Unknown had broken out so.

"My man down on the shore—don't you see him? Stay here! Don't follow me! I'll have the brace-lets on him in no time, and bring him back!"

Off darted the Unknown.

The boys saw him run over the ice and disappear down the bank.

A moment later and he could be seen hurrying down the frozen bed of the Klondike. As they stood watching him he rounded the point and disappeared.

"What's all that mean?" exclaimed Dick. "Of course, there was no man there."

"Certainly not," said Ned. "He's gone after that fellow Miles. Hold your tongue, Dick, and don't say a word. The old detective fever is on him. We may find out something when he gets back."

This proved a poor day.

In Drift No. 1 the boys struck a barren streak.

Number two still continued its steady yield, and as they found themselves short handed, Ned and Dick worked with Jerry and Struthers after the first hour.

Again and again Ned saw Jerry slip nuggets into his pocket.

Indeed, the claim shark scarcely made an attempt to conceal it, but Ned was shrewd enough to hold his tongue.

The afternoon was devoted to working, but the yield was comparatively small.

Darkness came, and nothing was seen of the Unknown.

The days were even getting longer, and all looked forward to the time when it would be all day and little or no night, and that time was close at hand.

At six o'clock Ned took out supper to Jerry and Bill.

"Where's his nibs?" asked Jerry. "I hain't seen him the whole day."

"He's out hunting," said Ned.

"Hunting for what?"

"You'll have to ask him when he comes back."

"When will that be?"

"I'll let you know when he comes. Do you leave us in the morning?"

"That's what I said," growled Jerry, and he turned away.

It was an anxious night, for the Unknown did not return.

Neither Ned nor Dick turned in at all, and when morning came, and they went out to the shaft house, another surprise awaited them.

Jerry and Bill had disappeared.

"Thank Heaven, they are gone at last!" exclaimed Edith, who came hurrying out in response to Ned's shout.

"Hello! Hello! Weltonville, hello!" was shouted in the distance just then.

"The Unknown at last!" cried Ned, and they all ran down to the shore.

The detective was just coming up over the bank.

"Where in the world have you been?" demanded Ned.

"Don't say a word, dear boy! I missed my man again. He escaped me, but this time I made no mistake. It was he!"

"Rubbish! What have you been about?" cried Dick.

"I'm about starved—that's what. Where's Jerry and Struthers?"

"Gone!" said Ned.

"Ah! I thought so? Well, I saw that man Miles."

"You did?"

"Yes. Caught his trail at last!"

"Where did he go?"

"Where should he go but to an Injun camp, down the river about twenty miles. There's thirty Injuns there, and they've got a dog sled. Let me see! They ought to be here inside of half an hour. I ran like blazes coming back, and they were going to start at daybreak. Yes, I should think half an hour would be about the time, but it may be sooner than that."

"That means an attack," said Ned.

"Exactly. What did you expect?"

"Do you suppose Jerry and Bill have gone to meet them?"

"Don't suppose at all, I'm sure of it. We want to stow away the gold right lively now, for the snake is all ready to show his deadly fangs."

"And we are ready for him," cried Ned, "thanks to you; but I don't know of any safer place to hide the gold than where it is."

They hurried back to the hut.

There was neither lock nor bar to the door, for this had not been considered necessary.

"We must find some way of fastening up here," said the Unknown, "but first of all, let's have a look at the gold."

Now the gold had been kept under a loose board in the floor, where a hole had been dug.

The greatest care had been observed to prevent Jerry Tolman from gaining knowledge of this hiding-place.

"Better take it away up in the woods," said the Unknown. "Like enough we'll be driven out of here, if nothing worse happens."

"But how did you find out all this?" demanded Ned. "I want to know the whole story."

"Ye gods and little fishes! How many times have I got to tell it? Didn't I creep into the bushes near the Injun camp? Didn't I hear Miles bargain with them to come up here and clean us out? What more do you want than that?"

"No more!" cried Dick. "Ned, we must act at once!"

"Instantly," said Edith. "There isn't a moment to be lost!"

"We'll take the gold up into the woods as you say," said Ned.

He hurried into the corner and raised the loose board, starting back with a despairing exclamation as he looked down into the hole.

"Gone, of course!" said the Unknown.

"Gone, gone!" gasped Ned. "Gone, every ounce

of it! No, here's the little bag with the nine golden nuggets, but that's all!"

It was a crushing announcement.

Dick wouldn't believe it until he had looked into the hole himself.

"How could it have happened?" he cried. "We haven't left the hut alone for a moment. Either Edith or Mrs. Colvin has been here all the while."

Edith was the picture of despair.

"No, Dick, you are wrong. I suppose it is my fault. Mrs. Colvin was out after water while you and Ned went down to the river to meet Zed just now, and I followed you out—you remember. It was done then."

"I called you, Edith," said Ned. "Don't blame yourself for that."

"But I do. I ought to have thought."

"That's the time it was done, sure," said the Unknown. "Jerry and Bill were on the watch. Well, boys, they've left us the nine golden nuggets, and we've got to begin over again. Anyhow, they are our mascots; but by the Jumping Jeremiah, we can't be sure of those till we see 'em; they may have changed them for stones. Throw them out on the table, Ned, and let's see if they are all right."

Ned turned the bag bottom upward and the nine nuggets came out.

"Safe!" said the Unknown. "Jerry Tolman has left us a nest egg, bless his heart."

"Someone outside!" cried Dick, seizing his rifle.

Ned made a grab for his, and the Unknown drew his club out of his trousers' leg where he carried it half the time.

But the sounds were not heard again.

"I thought I heard a footstep on the snow," said Dick.

They hurried out and went all around the hut, but could find nothing suspicious.

"You were mistaken," said Ned, dropping upon a stool beside the table after they returned. "There was nobody. Oh, Dick, this is a crushing blow!"

"'Tain't at all," said Edith. "It's only a good lesson. We'll begin again. There's more gold in the drifts than we took out, a thousand times over. I'll turn in and help now. Even if we never get back what we've lost, we'll soon be able to make it good."

"We'll get it back," said the Unknown. "Boys, you've laughed about my man many a time—you pretend to believe he's a myth. Now, I've got a man—it's Jerry Tolman. I really am a detective—I swear it! See me work up this case, and get the money back."

"A quarter of it is yours if you get it!" cried Ned.

"All detectives work for rewards, and there's one for you. Dick, do you agree?"

"Every time!" cried Dick.

"May I be ground up in a sausage machine and fed to Dutchmen, if I take one grain of dust!" cried the Unknown. "Will you never know me as I really am?"

"Never, till we know your name," laughed Ned—

he always had to laugh, no matter how badly things went, and after all it is better to laugh than cry.

"You shall know it now," said the Unknown.

"My name is——"

Suddenly there was a shadow thrown across the door.

"Somebody coming!" cried Ned.

"Jerry Tolman! I see him!" exclaimed Edith; "he's making for the door!"

It was so.

Two men were coming along the path from the shaft house. It was the claim shark and Bill Struthers, sure enough.

As Jerry Tolman came through the door, rifle in hand, all sprang up.

"Ah, ha! Nine golden nuggets, eh?" cried Jerry.

"They are mine!"

"Get out of here, Jerry Tolman," said Ned, sternly. Dick leveled his rifle at the claim shark, and the Unknown sprang forward with his club.

CHAPTER X.

"WE'VE LOST EVERYTHING BUT THE NINE GOLDEN NUGGETS—WE MUST BEGIN ALL OVER AGAIN."

It was a mistake for Ned to order Jerry Tolman out of the hut, and the Unknown knew it.

His ears were as sharp as a sleuth hound's, and he felt sure that the claim shark and his companion were alone.

"Leave me to deal with this scoundrel!" he said.

"Jerry Tolman, there's three rifles against your two, and Edith never misses her aim, and here's my club to boot. Stand where you are and give an account of yourself, or you're as good as dead."

"Let him get out!" cried Ned. "I won't talk to him here! He's no right to cross this threshold!"

Edith swept the nine golden nuggets into the bag and pocketed it.

Then she caught up her rifle and stood ready to act.

All this time Jerry Tolman remained in the doorway scowling blackly, Bill Struthers coming up behind him.

"I'm here after my own," he growled, "and I mean to have it! Your day is over, Young Klondike, and mine has just come."

"Who was telling you?" sneered the Unknown.

"Come in here! We want to talk! Come in, Bill!"

"Not till Dick lowers that gun," growled Jerry.

"That gun's up to shoot the thief who stole our gold," said Dick. "It don't go down till Ned says the word!"

"I took the gold! Make the most of it!" snarled Jerry. "It's mine. It was found on my land. I warn you all off here. This yere claim hain't for sale no more."

It was too much.

Ned's patience was exhausted.

He made one rush for Jerry, and caught him by the throat.

"The gold! Give us back the gold!" he cried. Jerry howled, for Ned's grip was like iron.

Dick fired at Bill Struthers, who was about to rush to the rescue.

Bill got a nip in the shoulder that time and tumbled back.

All in the same instant, Jerry, dropping his rifle, managed to get his arms about Ned.

He tried to throw him, but Ned resisted like a hero.

Dick and the Unknown jumped in, and Jerry got the club over his head.

He was only too glad to drop his hold, and with a howl he sprang through the doorway and disappeared.

"Don't shoot! After him! Catch him alive, or we may never see the gold again!" roared the Unknown.

Dick would have done for Jerry, but for that.

Edith ran to Ned and helped him up.

Mrs. Colvin was screaming in the loft, and it was a case of confusion worse confounded about that time.

"Let me go, Edith! Let me go!" cried Ned. "I'm not hurt a bit! Oh, that scoundrel! Why didn't I choke him while I had a chance?"

"We'll both go," said Edith. "I only waited to see if you were hurt, Ned."

They ran out, but met the Unknown and Dick coming back again.

"He's given us the slip," said Dick, dolefully. "He got across the creek and went into the woods."

"Follow him! Follow him! Why do you hesitate?" cried Ned.

"No!" said the Unknown. "It's a lead! That's what he wants. Young Klondike, the woods on the other side of the creek are full of Indians. Go over there if you will, but if you do, you will never come back alive."

"Don't go, Ned! Don't go," pleaded Edith. "For my sake, Ned, don't go!"

Ned cooled down.

There was nothing else for it.

"He ought to have been shot," he declared. "We ought never to have hesitated."

"Now, now, Young Klondike! That ain't your style! By the Jumping Jeremiah, I don't know that I ever saw you lose your head before! That man knows where the gold is; shoot him, and who'll know then? Not Bill Struthers, I'll bet you. Keep your shirt on. This is detective business. Leave the management of the case to the great Unknown."

"So I say," put in Edith. "His is the oldest head."

"And the biggest," chuckled the detective. "It'll be bigger yet, if I succeed in getting back that gold."

All felt that this was a good time for a council of war, and that the Unknown's advice was not to be despised.

"I'm all right now," said Ned. "Let's all keep our wits about us. First and foremost, how do you know there are Indians over the other side of the creek?"

"We saw them," said Dick.

"That's right," added the Unknown; "but I don't see them now. Redskins are all alike, wherever you find them; they never show themselves until they are ready to attack. You see, the idea is just this: like

all fellows of his class, Jerry Tolman is dead superstitious. He thinks it would be bad luck to kill a man who saved his life. It ain't that he loves you a bit better than he did before, or hates you a bit less. It is purely a question of luck. He's out for business. When he first started up here, I don't doubt for one instant that he meant to strangle us all, but when he was headed off on that, he just let things drift until the right time came to act, and it has come now."

"Are we losing time talking?" asked Edith, "or is there anything we can do?"

"I don't see what we can do, but to guard the hut on all sides."

"Oh! Oh!" screamed Mrs. Colvin, from the door. "Fire! Fire! Injuns! Help!"

It was already too late to do anything.

Smoke was seen coming out of the interior of the hut.

Mrs. Colvin rushed out and Ned and Dick ran in.

They were glad enough to retreat again.

Six blazing pine torches had been thrown through the window, and several Indians were crowding in.

"Capture them alive! Don't kill 'em," shouted Jerry Tolman's voice, and followed by Bill Struthers and a big band of Indians he came rushing around the hut.

It was a complete surprise.

While Ned and the others had been talking, the claim shark and his crew had stolen round to the back of the hut.

Ned, Dick and Edith instantly opened fire, at the same time retreating toward the shaft house.

"Throw down your guns! Surrender, and your lives shall be spared!" cried Jerry, for the shots, although taking down two Indians wounded, had spared him.

"Never!" cried Ned.

"Then look out for yourself, Young Klondike! At 'em, boys! Sweep 'em down!"

The Indians made a rush, sending a shower of arrows toward the shaft house.

"We've got to take to our heels!" cried the Unknown.

Ned saw that he was right.

The enemy was too strong for them.

They dodged behind the shaft house and ran for their lives, gaining a little hill by the river bank, where they were out of range, and where Mrs. Colvin inconveniently fainted, which put a stop to further retreat.

"What's to be done?" panted Ned. "Are we to give up so?"

"Stop! Take it easy!" said the Unknown. "We can't fight fifty men, and that's the force down there. Edith, my dear, don't worry about Mrs. Colvin—she'll come around all right. He who fights and runs away, Young Klondike, may live to fight another day, and don't you forget it. By the Jumping Jeremiah, I've just begun."

By the time he got through talking Mrs. Colvin had

come to, and was sitting on the snow with her head against Edith's shoulder, sobbing hysterically.

"Women are a nuisance at a time like this," growled the Unknown. "Not such as Edith—I don't mean that. See, Young Klondike, they are going to burn everything. That shows that Jerry has no intention of working the claim himself. Probably he is satisfied with what he's got. Well, well, well! Our snake has turned on us with a vengeance. There's everything going up in smoke."

The hut was now all in a blaze.

The Indians were running about like madmen, pulling the furniture out of the hut, and taking possession of everything of any value to themselves.

These things they carried across the creek, disappearing in the forest.

"We've lost everything," said Ned—"everything but the nine golden nuggets; we must begin all over again."

"Then we'll begin now," said the Unknown. "The dog team is over there on the other side of the point, and I'll bet the gold is there too."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAPTURE OF THE DOG TEAM.

IF Ned Golden had been one of the kind to be discouraged, now would have been the time to give up.

Fortunately for himself and everybody else, he was not that sort of fellow at all.

He realized the situation fully.

The misfortune which had come to our little party, was not confined to the loss of the gold, by any means.

It was far worse than that.

Famine stared them in the face.

The Indians were carrying off all the provisions, as well as the furniture.

In a few moments there would be nothing left to eat, and worse than all they only had a few cartridges, all the rest having been left in the hut, which was now wrapped in flames.

"We are lost if we don't act at once!" cried Ned; "do you stop to think, Zed, that we are going to starve to death if we let Jerry Tolman go out of this with all our stuff?"

"Do I stop to think! Well, I guess! We'll starve and we'll freeze—we are gone cases entirely, unless we can head that scoundrel off."

"Then why not act now? We must do something."

"What would you suggest, Young Klondike?"

"We'll leave Edith and Mrs. Colvin here, and you and I and Dick will follow them up and fight for our lives—for it means death to us to have all our stuff carted away."

"'Twon't do, Young Klondike. We'd never come back."

"And you'd never go without me," said Edith. "Don't forget that, Ned."

"You've got some scheme in your head—out with it!" said Dick to the Unknown.

"Hold on! I've got a scheme!" cried Ned.

"Bet you the drinks it's the same as mine—hold on, you don't drink. Bet you the dinners at Delmonico's next time we strike New York."

"I take it."

"What's your scheme?"

"You say they've got dog sleds around the point."

"I'm sure of it."

"Let's watch our chance, and cut through the woods to the cove—that's where they are if they are anywhere—and we'll pick off the dogs with our remaining cartridges. Let's see them get away with our stuff then."

"Won! My scheme exactly."

"Now's our time," said Dick. "See, the last of them have gone."

"Across the creek, lively!" cried the Unknown. "Mrs. Colvin, you follow as fast as you can; we must have Edith, and we go on the run."

When they came to the edge of the woods overlooking the cove, there were the dog teams sure enough.

There were two big sleds and one smaller one.

On the last Sam Miles and Bill Struthers were already seated, but Jerry Tolman was not to be seen.

"Get along down the bank, Dick!" whispered Ned. "They are going to start. Head 'em off! Kill their dogs; Edith and I will do for the others and join you."

"Why not stick together?" demanded Dick.

"I want to separate Jerry from the Indians."

"But Jerry ain't there."

"He's coming—see! By gracious, he's got one of our bags of dust, and make no doubt the rest are on the little sled. Run Dick! Run! Don't stop to argue—go!"

"I'll go with him," said the Unknown; "Young Klondike, you are right! We'll block their game, sure."

Off they flew along the bank, keeping inside the tree line, and out of sight.

Meanwhile, the Indians were loading the other sleds with the household goods and stores from the hut.

Jerry put the bag on the sled, and went back into the woods, returning with another.

Altogether there were four bags; the other two must have been already on the sled, for when Jerry put this one on he prepared to start.

"Oh, the scoundrel!" breathed Ned. "I'd like to fire at his head right now."

"Keep cool, Ned; you couldn't hit it."

"Could you?"

"Yes; it would spoil it all. Wait!"

"Can you fetch the dogs? Aren't we beyond range?"

"I can do it! Patience! There they go!"

With a shout, Jerry took the reins and started the dog sled down the Klondike.

"Ready, Ned!" breathed Edith. "Aim low! Fire just as soon as you hear Dick's shot!"

They only had to wait a moment.

Suddenly a rifle cracked.

Then there was another shot and another.

Instantly Edith and Ned began shooting.

There were six dogs to each of the sleds in the cove, and the one that had just left it was drawn by four.

Edith had a full charge in her Winchester, and so had Ned.

They fired down upon the dogs as rapidly as possible.

Now was the time when the brave girl's splendid marksmanship came into good play.

Every shot she fired told, and Ned hit twice.

Eight dogs dropped in the cove.

The Indians were dumfounded.

They were of the Copper Mine tribe, and as cowardly as they were treacherous.

As shot after shot came, and dog after dog dropped, they were seized with panic and took to the woods.

In less time than it takes to tell it the cove was deserted.

The remaining four dogs—they were all harnessed to one sled—started off down the river on the run, dragging the bodies of the two dead ones with them.

Bump! Bump! Bump! went the sled over the ice.

Suddenly it struck a hummock and overturned, and everything was spilled off.

But the dogs dashed madly on, dragging the sled on its side, and disappeared around the point.

"Heavens! we've lost it!" cried Edith. "I made sure we'd capture that sled!"

"Run! Run!" cried Ned. "The Indians will be after us as soon as they get over their scare! Run for your life!"

They ran like mad along the edge of the bank.

As soon as they got across the end of the point and could see down the Klondike, they caught sight of Jerry Tolman's sled.

It was well on down the river, but there were only three dogs attached to it.

Dick and the Unknown were not to be seen, and the other sled was likewise invisible, but the sharp barking of dogs distinctly heard, told them that it could not be far away.

"Ned! Ned!" Dick's voice suddenly called out.

"They are right here under the bank!" exclaimed Edith. "Oh, if we could only get down!"

The bank was shelving here, and there was no chance to descend.

"Coming!" shouted Ned, and they ran further forward, soon finding a place where it was possible to get down.

"We've got it! We've got it, dear boy!" yelled the Unknown, as Ned and Edith came down over the bank.

There was the sled, sure enough.

Dick had already turned it over, and the Unknown was adjusting the harness on the live dogs, having just cut away the dead ones.

"Where's the other sled?" he eagerly demanded.

"Back in the cove! Dogs all dead!" Ned cried.

"Bully for you! We made a botch of it. There

goes your gold, Young Klondike, but we're one dog ahead, and may overhaul them yet."

"Mrs. Colvin! We can't leave her!" cried Edith.

"Where is the dear soul? Why ain't she here?" thundered the Unknown. "Ye gods and little fishes! What a nuisance these women are?"

"There she comes!" cried Dick.

Just then Mrs. Colvin appeared on top of the bank.

"Don't leave me! Don't leave me to be scalped by the Indians!" she panted.

"Nobody means to leave you! Come down!" bawled the Unknown.

"Wait! Stay where you are! You'll break your neck!" shouted Ned. "I'll come up after you!"

But it was too late.

In her fear of being left behind, good Mrs. Colvin had already started to descend the bank.

It was just a mass of slippery ice, and her feet flew from under her.

It was too funny to see the good soul—and she was a fat soul, too—come flying down the bank like lightning, waving her arms and screaming murder, but she landed in a snow drift, and was not hurt a bit.

Edith and Ned flew to the rescue, and soon got her on her feet.

Then they got her on the sled and got on themselves.

"Can you drive?" Ned asked the Unknown.

"You bet! Didn't I drive a dog team five hundred miles over the ice when I was in Greenland in '78? Heard my man was on Smith's Sound and I drove all the way from Upernavik! Don't believe it? Bother! I'm used to that. By the Jumping Jeremiah, here we go!"

The Unknown cracked his whip, and away they flew down the Klondike, the sled bumping over the hummocks, and Mrs. Colvin holding on for dear life.

"Go it, Flora Temple!" roared the Unknown. "Get ahead there, Maud S.! This race is for a purse of eighty thousand dollars, and Young Klondike is the sure winner! Whoop! Let her go!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATE OF THE GOLD.

"THERE they are!"

"No, they ain't. I tell you you don't see them."

"They're behind the point. I did see them. There they are again!"

"Upon my word, you were right, Young Klondike!" cried the Unknown, bringing his whip down among the dogs again; "but they've got a long start, and I doubt very much if we can overhaul them."

"Don't say that!" cried Dick.

"I don't want to say it, but I must. It looks bad. Oh, if you had only been a better shot."

"That's the unkindest cut of all," said Dick. "I don't brag much on my shooting, but, I want Ned to understand that I did my best."

"Nobody doubts that, Dick," said Ned, "but we

haven't heard what you did do yet. Why not tell it now?"

"Why, Ned, I only had two shots in my rifle, and I fired both; one took down a dog, and the other missed."

"Couldn't expect more than that, Dick; neither you nor I pretend to shoot like Edith. What did Jerry Tolman say?"

"Say? You ought to have heard him swear. He couldn't see us either, and that was what puzzled him; but he didn't wait to look much; he just jumped off the sled and cut away the dead dog, and they were off again in a minute."

"And then your team came tearing down," added the Unknown. "We made up our minds we'd go for that anyhow, and this is the result."

"We don't seem to be overhauling them," said Ned. "They are steadily gaining on us. It's a bad job."

"I don't like to be discouraging, but that's what it is," said the Unknown. "Let's take an account of stock, boys, and see where we stand."

"If you mean what we've got left after this raid, it's easily figured up," said Ned. "There's the nine golden nuggets and that's all."

"And your goods in the cove."

"Probably the Indians have made off with them before this."

"I'd like to know how they are going to carry them with dead dogs? Oh, no. But I didn't mean just that."

"What then?"

"Suppose we were to overhaul Jerry, have we anything left to fight with?"

"I've got your cartridges and I'll put them right in now," said Edith.

"I'm dry—haven't got any," said Ned.

"Same here," said Dick.

"And of provisions we haven't got even a bite, and here you are," said the Unknown. "This reminds me of the time when I was tracking my man across the desert of Gobi in '74."

"Bother the desert of Gobi! Don't believe you were there! We've got to eat."

"Yes, and as we can't eat each other, there's only one thing to do, whether we overhaul our men or whether we don't, and that's to keep on to Dawson."

"It's terrible to think of going back there so."

"Not at all. You've got to go to report your assessment work. There's one very important piece of property which we still have left—you seem to have lost sight of that altogether."

"You allude to the mine?" said Dick.

"I allude to Young Klondike's claim. Is its value any the less on account of this raid? I think not."

"That's what's the matter," said Ned. "I've done the assessment work now, and we can easily pull up again. The law will protect me."

"There they go!" cried Edith. "They've turned off from the river. What does that mean?"

"That they are trying to give us the slip," said the

Unknown. "The stupid fool! If he'd keep straight ahead we couldn't catch them. Now we have a chance."

The chase down the Klondike had now been in progress several hours.

Night was approaching, and there was a storm in the air. The situation was more serious than any of the party were willing to admit.

The Unknown kept his dogs going until they came to the point where Jerry Tolman's sled had turned off from the Klondike.

Here the creek entered the river. The claim shark had evidently gone up this creek.

"I don't believe he can go far," said Ned, after they had surveyed the scene for a few moments. "See, there are the mountains right ahead of us. Jerry means to camp in the woods here somewhere for the night, thinking that we'll pass him. You see that there are mines right ahead, and he don't want to go by them with us at his heels."

"That's what," said the Unknown. "I say, let's stay right where we are and watch for the rat to come out of the hole."

"You think I am right?"

"I'm sure you are right. Jerry wants to travel by night past the camps. Probably the first of them are right ahead."

"What's the matter with our pushing on and getting help from some of the camps?" said Dick. "They are our neighbors, so to speak."

"Don't do anything of the kind. They won't help us. They'll be more apt to listen to Jerry's side of the story; fact is, they won't take sides either way in the matter of a disputed claim."

There was no denying that the Unknown was right.

"Let's go ashore and camp for the night," said Edith. "Mrs. Colvin is nearly used up with our long ride."

It was so decided.

They turned up the creek, and soon found the place they wanted.

Here a great overhanging ledge of rocks offered shelter, and there was a thick clump of scrub cedars to protect them from observation in case Jerry Tolman should suddenly return.

"And he will return, mark my words," said the Unknown. "I'm in favor of making a camp in this cove. Who knows but what I shall find my man hiding here. By the Jumping Jeremiah, there he is now!"

It was another of the detective's sudden breaks.

The boys had become pretty well accustomed to them by this time, and they knew there was no sort of use in trying to hold the Unknown back.

Leaping off the sled and throwing the reins to Ned, he rushed in among the cedars and disappeared from view.

"Don't leave us!" cried Edith.

"Come back, Zed! Come back!" shouted Ned.

They could hear the Unknown's chuckling laugh, but there was no other answer.

Dick ran out of the cedars to see which way he was

going, and when he came back, he reported that the Unknown was traveling off up the creek as fast as his stumpy legs could carry him with his tall hat jammed on the back of his head, and his club ready for instant use.

"I know what that means," said Ned. "He's going to locate the enemy while we take a rest."

"It's a shame to let him go alone. Suppose he gets lost?"

"Trust him for that. Beside, he don't want us. Dick, I tell you what you do."

"What?"

"Make the ladies as comfortable as you can and look out for the dogs, while I take a run down the Klondike. We've got half an hour of light yet, and I want to see how near we are to the first camp, if I can."

"Don't be gone long, Ned."

"I won't. I'll go as long as the light lasts, and then turn back."

Ned hurried off, and was back inside of an hour.

It was entirely dark now.

Dick challenged as he heard Ned coming through the cedars, calling out:

"Who goes there?"

"It's all right, old man!" shouted Ned.

"You, Ned?"

"Yes. Is the Unknown back?"

"Not yet."

"Edith and Mrs. Colvin all right?"

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Colvin is asleep under the rocks. Here's Edith to speak for herself."

"What did you find, Ned?" asked Edith, coming out from among the cedars, rifle in hand.

"There's a camp right on the shore about three miles down. I heard them blasting. I think they are trying to break up the ice."

"What for?"

"They want to turn the water on to their work, I s'pose, and so save lugging it. I heard the explosion before I came in sight of the camp."

"Did you go on then?"

"No; I turned back. There's a lot in what the Unknown said, Edith. Our neighbors don't want our quarrels on their hands; and as for grub, it ain't likely they've got any more than they want for themselves."

"Speaking of grub," said Edith, "there's plenty of water here. It would be a splendid place for gold washing, providing there is any gold."

"Suppose it would in summer time. There's water enough under the ice."

"No, no! I don't mean that! There's running water here now."

"How can that be, with the thermometer only a little above zero?"

"Come and see," said Dick. "Edith is right."

"We can't all go. Someone must stay on the watch in case Jerry Tolman should come down the creek."

"Oh, this is right on the bank of the creek; we can

watch all the while," said Edith. "Come right along, Ned."

Ned's curiosity was now aroused, and he hurried after Edith.

They soon came to a place where the ledge came almost out to the edge of the bank.

"I hear water dropping," cried Ned; "this is very strange."

"There you are," cried Edith, pointing in through a narrow rift in the rocks. "It's right in there."

This was the entrance to a small cave.

Ned stooped down and crawled in, Edith following.

"It's too dark to see much," she said, when they were able to stand upright. "Have you got any flammers left, Ned? I used my last when I was here before."

Ned had two boxes, and he hastened to strike a light.

He could now see a stream of water rushing down over the rocks into a deep hole, where it seemed to disappear under ground.

It was comparatively warm in the cave.

This and the fact that the water was constantly moving had kept it from freezing.

It was a great sight for the Klondike in the month of March.

"Gracious! What washing we could do with a supply of water like that!" cried Ned.

"I wonder where it goes to?" said Edith.

"Passes into the creek by some underground passage, I suppose," said Ned. "I believe I could get down there and see, those rocks are just like steps."

"Don't try it!" cried Edith. "You'll break your neck."

"I'm going to do it, though," said Ned. "I'm curious to see where that water goes."

Two flammers had burned out by this time, and Ned lighting a third, climbed down into the hole.

Suddenly he gave a great shout.

"Gold!" he cried. "Gold. Look out, Edith! Here she comes!"

He stooped down and threw something up at Edith's feet.

It was a nugget as big as a cocoanut.

Another and another followed.

Then Ned lit another flamer and threw up six more.

"That's all!" he exclaimed. "This water is only six or eight inches deep. I don't see any more now."

He climbed up and struck a light once more.

"Nine nuggets!" he cried. "Here's luck!"

"What is it?" called Dick, through the mouth of the cave.

"Nine golden nuggets—whoppers!" shouted Ned.

"Our nine? Have the grown?"

"No, no! Nine new ones!"

A shout outside called Dick away.

"The Unknown is coming!" he cried.

"Leave these things here, Ned!" exclaimed Edith; "we can get them afterward."

They crawled out of the cave, and in a moment the Unknown joined them on the shore.

"Jerry's coming!" he panted. "Oh, what a run I've had! He's right behind me! I told you he would attempt to pass the camps by night."

"What are we to do?" demanded Ned.

"Dick, get the team ready—here, I'll help. Ned, you and Edith shoot the dogs from behind the trees. Don't s'pose it's any use to ask you to shoot the men, but that's what you ought to do."

Away he flew with Dick at his heels.

Edith and Ned got their rifles, and stood among the trees.

"Mine's empty," said Ned, ruefully. "Edith, what are you going to do?"

"I can't shoot a man except in self-defense, Ned."

"I didn't ask it. Give me the rifle. Our lives may depend upon this!"

"No, Ned. A human life is not to be taken lightly. We'll try the dogs first, but I won't fire but two shots."

"And the others?"

"Are for Jerry Tolman, if needs must be."

"Here they come!"

They were nearer than either had thought for.

Another anxious moment and the dog sled came in sight.

Jerry Tolman was driving—they were flying along like the wind.

As they passed the cedars Edith let fly.

For once she missed.

The sled went past like lightning. There was no chance to get in a second shot.

Alarmed by the report of the rifle, and not knowing what it meant, Jerry Tolman lashed his dogs around into the Klondike.

"No go!" cried Ned. "It's a stern chase again."

Their sled now came spinning through an opening in the cedars.

"Jump on," cried the Unknown. "The chase begins again."

Mrs. Colvin was already on the sled with Dick, and Ned and Edith lost no time taking their places.

The Unknown cracked his whip and away they went whirling around into the Klondike.

"A stern chase is a long chase," said the Unknown, "but it will come to an end some time. I tried to sneak into their camp and cut their dogs loose, but they were getting ready to move when I got there, and I thought it was the safest way to get back as fast as I could."

"They see us," cried Ned. "Ha! Jerry is going to fire!"

They could see Bill take the reins while Jerry threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired back.

The bullet whistled harmlessly by.

"You could take that scoundrel if you wanted to, Edith," said the Unknown, grimly.

"I can't do it, and I won't," replied the girl.

"All the samee you could if you chose, and I would if I could shoot like you," growled the Unknown.

On they flew.

Soon it became apparent that they were gaining on the other sled.

Jerry fired twice, but both shots missed.

"Upon my word, if we can't do something to stop this I don't see any use in going on," declared the Unknown.

"There's the camp!" cried Ned. "Hello! There's a man!"

The huts of the mining camp stood up on a little bluff.

Suddenly a man came running out upon the edge of the bluff shouting to Jerry and wildly waving his hands.

"What's he saying?" cried Dick.

"He seems to be ordering Jerry back," said Ned, "but he's going straight ahead."

This was just what Jerry was doing.

He entirely mistook the motive of the warning shout.

The man on the bluff threw up his hands with a despairing gesture.

All at once the still night air was rent with a fearful explosion.

The dog sled with Jerry Tolman, Bill Struthers, and Sam Miles went flying upward, mingled with great masses of broken ice.

"Ye gods and little fishes!" cried the Unknown, "there's no flaw now in the title to Young Klondike's claim!"

For men and dogs came down into the open water and passing under the ice were swept away down the stream.

* * * * *

"It served them right, so it does," said Mr. Barney McGraw, the chief owner of Claim No. 89. "Jerry Tolman was a scoundrel, if one ever lived. He swindled me out of three thousand dollars a year ago. If I'd known it was him I wouldn't have fretted myself the way I did, but sure I'm sorry that yez hev lost your gold."

These remarks were made in course of the conversation which followed after Ned Golden and his friends came into the camp on Claim 89, and told their story to the miners who crowded about them.

Still there were many there that night who felt that they were more or less murderers.

Even Barney McGraw declared next morning that it was the last time they would attempt to blow up the ice in the night, which work was being done in order to turn a supply of water into the big gold washer in use on this claim.

But right or wrong the imprudent action of these miners put an end to the chase, and to Ned's hopes of recovering the gold.

Our little party was hospitably entertained in the camp, and next morning they started for Dawson City, where Ned told his story to the claim recorder.

"You are certainly the owner of 172 now," was the decision of the recorder. "In fact, you were anyway, as soon as you had done the necessary assessment

work, for I have since learned that Jerry Tolman never did a day's work on that land until he went to work for you."

This settled it.

Ned's title was now fixed beyond dispute.

The nine golden nuggets were sold, and brought more than was expected, six hundred and forty-eight dollars being the return.

Ned invested it all in provisions, and two days later the whole party set out to return to Weltonville without a cent in their pockets.

As they drew near Owl Creek—that was the name of the place where they had halted that night, Ned, who was driving, suddenly turned off the river bed.

"Where are you going, Young Klondike?" cried the Unknown, who had heard nothing of Ned's wonderful find in the cave.

"After nine golden nuggets!" laughed Ned. "We've got to have a nest egg sure."

"Ye gods and little fishes! Ain't the nine golden nuggets sold for a mess of pottage—I mean for grub."

"Not much!" laughed Dick. "We wouldn't do anything like that. The nine are still ours, all right!"

"But what in thunder!"

"Mystery! Want it explained?"

"Every time."

"Then explain yours. Tell us your name."

"My name is Mud, I'm thinking," chuckled the Unknown. "A few weeks ago I thought myself rich, and now I ain't worth a blame cent."

The sight of the nine golden nuggets in the cave cheered the Unknown up wonderfully, but in the excess of his joy, he did not tell his name.

The hole was thoroughly prospected, but no more gold was found.

So with the nine nuggets, which averaged at least two pounds each, they returned to Weltonville to find their goods on the ice exactly where they had left them. The Indians had never returned.

Edith and Mrs. Colvin were made as comfortable as possible in the shaft house, while Ned, Dick and the Unknown built a brush shelter for themselves until the portable house, which Ned had ordered in Dawson, should arrive.

"We'll go right to work again and do the best we can, and I'm sure we shall soon repair damages," declared Ned.

"Thank Heaven we haven't got Jerry Tolman to fear any longer," said Edith.

Indeed all felt relief at the thought that the villain was no more.

So all hands turned in to work Young Klondike's claim with a will.

It was no prospect hole now.

On the contrary, its great richness was a proven fact.

What success Ned Golden and his friends met in this undertaking will be found fully described in the next story of this series, which is even more interesting and full of thrilling adventure than the one which we now close.

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[THE END.]

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